10
SHORT
STORIES

argosy

Simenon
INSPECTOR
MAIGRET

Victor Canning
Gerald Sparrow
Brian Cleeve

ALISTAIR
MACLEAN

OCTOBER—2/6

Price in Australia and New Zealand

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argosy

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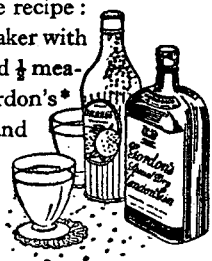

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Georges Simenon . . .

ENTER INSPECTOR MAIGRET

GEORGES SIMENON writes his books in a state of furious concentration, five thousand words a day, ten days at a time. He cannot remember how many books he wrote under various pen-names in the 1920's, when, as a young man, he left his Liége home for Paris.

Then, in 1929, came Inspector Maigret: the stout, middle-brow, middle-class policeman with the eternal pipe, and eternal vigilance.

Unlike most of his rivals in the crime field Maigret never makes amazing deductions from trifling clues, conjures up superhuman analyses in a cosy sanctum, or devotes himself to battles of wit in the court-room. The Inspector seldom has to pull a gun, and does not get passionately entangled with long-legged blondes.

A Maigret adventure may begin with the weather: it is wet or foggy or too hot, and Mme Maigret is bothered about the Inspector's health. A few words, and the atmosphere is set. We are in a suburb of Paris, a country town, or an Atlantic seaport, sharply evoked.

Action starts at once. Who is lying? Who has got a weakness that will eventually be disclosed, a hushed up family scandal or a concealed ambition that has led to murder? The point of breakdown will come, and Maigret's psychological patience fetches out the surprising truth.

What Simenon gives us is a big snapshot of life, muddles, mistakes, dreams and illusions portrayed by a master mind. On TV, in novels, stories, Maigret's personality has immediate impact.

Argosy is proud to present Chief Inspector Maigret.

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welcomes

INSPECTOR MAIGRET

in a new story

JEUMONT:

51 minutes' wait

by GEORGES SIMENON

DIMLY through a deep sleep Maigret heard a ringing sound, but he was not aware that it was the telephone bell and that his wife was leaning over him to answer.

"It's Paulie," she said, shaking her husband. "He wants to speak to you."

"You, Paulie?" Maigret growled, half awake.

"Is that you, Nunk?" came from the other end of the wire.

It was three in the morning. The bed was warm but the windowpanes were covered with frost flowers, for it was freezing

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Naturally each one protested entire innocence . . .

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outside. It was freezing even harder up at Jeumont, from where Paulie was telephoning.

"What's that you say? . . . Wait—I'll take the names . . . Otto . . . Yes, spell it, it's safer."

Madame Maigret, watching her husband, had only one question in her mind: whether he would have to get up or not. And, of course, he did, grumbling away. "Something very odd has happened," he explained, "over at Jeumont, and Paulie has taken it upon himself to detain an entire carriage . . ."

Paulie was Maigret's nephew, Paul Vinchon, and he was an inspector at the Belgian frontier.

"Where are you going?" Madame Maigret asked.

"First to Headquarters to get some information. Then I'll probably hop on the first train . . ."

When anything happens it is always on the 106—a train that leaves Berlin at 11 a.m. with one or two carriages from Warsaw, reaches Liége at 11.44 p.m., when the station is empty—it closes as soon as the train leaves—and finally gets to Erquelinnes at 1.57.

That evening the carriage steps were white with frost and slippery. At Erquelinnes the Belgian customs officials, who had virtually nothing to do as the train was on its way out, passed down the corridors, looking into a compartment here and there, before hurrying off back to the warmth of the station stove.

By 2.14 the train got under way again to cross the frontier, and reached Jeumont at 2.17.

"Jeumont!" came the cry of a porter running along the platform with a lamp. "Fifty-one minutes' wait!"

In most of the compartments the passengers were still asleep, the lights were dimmed and the curtains drawn.

"Second- and third-class passengers off the train for customs," echoed down the train.

And Inspector Paul Vinchon stood frowning at the number of curtains that were drawn back and lights turned up. He went up to the conductor. "Why are there so many travelling first today?" he asked.

"Some international congress of dentists that starts in Paris tomorrow. We have at least twenty-five of them as well as the ordinary passengers."

Vinchon climbed into the compartment at the head of the train, opened the doors one after the other, growling out mechanically, "Have your passports ready, please."

When the passengers had not wakened and the light was still dimmed, he turned it up; faces rose out of the shadows, swollen with fatigue.

Five minutes later, on his way back up the corridor, he passed

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the customs men who were going through the first-class compartments, clearing the passengers into the corridor, while they examined the seats and searched every cranny.

"Passports, identity cards . . ."

He was in one of the red-upholstered German carriages. Usually these compartments held only four passengers, but because of the invasion of dentists this one had six.

Paulie threw an admiring glance at the pretty woman with the Austrian passport in the left corner seat by the corridor. The others he hardly looked at until he reached the far side of the compartment, where a man, covered with a thick rug, still had not moved.

"Passport," he said, touching him on the shoulder.

The other passengers were beginning to open their cases for the customs officials, who were arriving. Vinchon shook his sleeping traveller harder; the man slid over on his side. A moment later Vinchon had ascertained he was dead . . .

The scene was chaotic. The compartment was too narrow for all the people who crowded in, and when a stretcher was brought in, there was some difficulty in placing the extremely heavy body on it.

"Take him to the first-aid post," Vinchon ordered. A little later he found a German doctor on the train.

At the same time he put a customs official on guard over the compartment. The young Austrian woman was the only one who wanted to leave the train to get some fresh air. When she was stopped, she gave a contemptuous shrug.

"Can you tell me what he died of?" Vinchon asked the doctor.

The doctor seemed puzzled; in the end, with Vinchon's help, he undressed the dead man. Even then there was no immediate sign of a wound; it took a good moment before the German pointed out, on the fleshy chest, a mark that could hardly be seen. "Someone stuck a needle in his heart," he said.

The train had still twelve or thirteen minutes before leaving again. The special inspector was absent. Vinchon, feverish with excitement, had to make a snap decision: he ran to the stationmaster and gave orders for the carriage to be uncoupled.

The passengers were not sure what was happening. Those in the adjoining compartments protested when they were told that the carriage was staying at Jeumont and that they would have to find seats elsewhere. Those who had been travelling with the dead man protested even more when Vinchon told them he was obliged to keep them there till the next day.

However, there was nothing else for it, seeing that there was a

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murderer among them. All the same, once the train had left, one carriage and six passengers short, Vinchon began to feel weak at the knees, and rang up his uncle.

At a quarter to four in the morning Maigret was at the Quai des Orfèvres; only a few lights were burning and he asked a sergeant on duty to make him some coffee. By four o'clock, with his office already clouded with pipe-smoke, he had Berlin on the line, and was dictating to a German colleague the names and addresses his nephew had given him. Afterwards he asked for Vienna, as one of the passengers in the compartment came from there, and then he wrote out a telegram for Warsaw, for there had also been a lady from Vilna by name of Irvitch.

Meanwhile, in the Inspector's office at the station at Jeumont, Paul Vinchon was taking a firm line with his five victims, whose reactions varied according to their temperaments. At least there was a good fire on—one of those large station stoves that swallows up bucket after bucket of coal. Vinchon had chairs brought in from the neighbouring offices, and good old administrative seats they were, too, with turned legs and shabby velvet upholstery.

"I assure you I am doing everything I can to speed things up, but in the circumstances I have no choice but to detain you here . . ."

He had not a minute to lose if he wanted to draw up anything like a suitable report for the morning. The passports were on his desk. The body of Otto Braun—the victim's name, according to the passport found in his pocket—was still at the first-aid post.

"I can, if you like, get you something to drink. But you will have to make up your minds quickly—the buffet is about to close."

At ten past four Vinchon was disturbed by a ring on the telephone. "Hullo? Aulnoye? What's that? Of course. There's probably some connection, yes. Well, send him over by the first train. And the documents, too, of course."

Vinchon went into an adjoining office to put through his call to Maigret unheard.

"Is that you, Nunk? . . . Something else, this time . . . A few minutes ago, as the train was drawing into the station at Aulnoye, a man was seen getting out from under a carriage . . . There was a bit of a chase, but they managed to get him in the end . . . He was carrying a waxed-paper packet of bearer bonds, mostly oil securities, for quite an amount . . . The man gave his name as Jef Bebelmans, native of Antwerp, and he gave his profession as acrobat . . . Yes . . . They're bringing him over on the first train . . . You'll be on that one, too? . . . No? . . . At 10.20? . . . Thanks, Nunk."

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And he returned to his flock of sheep and goats, as he called them.

When day broke, the frosty light made it seem even colder than the night before. Passengers for a local train started to arrive, and Vinchon worked on, deaf to the protests of his clients, who eventually subsided, overwhelmed with fatigue.

No time was lost. This was essential, for it was the kind of business that could bring diplomatic complications. One could not go on indefinitely detaining five travellers of different nationalities, all with their papers in order, just because a man had been killed in their railway compartment.

Maigret arrived at 10.20, as he had said he would. At 11, on a siding where the carriage had been shunted, the reconstruction of the crime took place.

It was a little ghostly, with the grey light, the cold, and the general weariness. Twice a nervous laugh rang out, proving that one of the lady passengers had helped herself too freely to the drinks to warm herself.

" First of all put the dead man in his seat," Maigret ordered. " I suppose the curtains on the outside window were drawn? "

" Nothing's been touched," said his nephew.

Of course, it would have been better to wait until night, until the exact time of the affair. But as that was impossible . . .

Otto Braun, according to his passport, was fifty-eight, born at Bremen, and formerly a banker at Stuttgart. He certainly looked the part, neatly dressed, with his comfortable, heavy build, close-cropped hair, and fairly pronounced Jewish features.

The information that had just arrived from Berlin stated: *Had to stop his financial activities after the National Socialist revolution, but gave an undertaking of loyalty to the Government, and has never been disturbed. Said to be very rich. Contributed one million marks to party funds.*

In one of his pockets Maigret found a hotel bill from the Kaiserhof, in Berlin, where Otto Braun had stayed three days on his way from Stuttgart.

Meanwhile the five passengers were standing in the corridor, watching, some dismally and others angrily, the comings and goings of Chief Inspector Maigret. Pointing to the luggage rack above Braun, he asked, " Are those his cases? "

" They're mine," came the sharp voice of Lena Leinbach, the Austrian.

" Will you take the seat you had last night? "

She did so reluctantly, and her unsteady movements betrayed the effects of the drinks. She was beautifully dressed, and wore a mink coat, and a ring on every finger.

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The report on her that was telegraphed from Vienna said: *Courtesan of the luxury class, who has had numerous affaires in the capitals of Central Europe, but has never come to the attention of the police. Was for a long time the mistress of a German prince . . .*

"Which of you got on at Berlin?" Maigret asked, turning to the others.

"If you will allow me," someone said in excellent French. And, in fact, it turned out to be a Frenchman, Adolphe Bonvoisin, from Lille.

"I can perhaps be of some help to you as I was on the train from Warsaw. There were two of us. I myself came from Lvov, where my firm—a textile concern—has a Polish subsidiary. Madame boarded the train at Warsaw at the same time as I did." He indicated a middle-aged woman in an astrakhan coat, Jewish like Otto Braun, dark and heavily built, with swollen legs.

"Madame Irvitch of Vilna?"

As she spoke no French, the interview was conducted in German. Madame Irvitch, the wife of a wholesale furrier, was coming to Paris to consult a specialist, and she wished to lodge a protest . . . .

"Sit down in the place you were occupying last night."

Two passengers remained, two men.

"Name?" Maigret asked the first, a tall, thin, distinguished man with an officer's bearing.

"Thomas Hauke, of Hamburg."

On Hauke, Berlin had had plenty to say: *Sentenced in* 1924 *to two years' imprisonment for dealing in stolen jewellery . . . closely watched since . . . frequents the pleasure spots of various European capitals . . . suspected of engaging in cocaine and morphine smuggling.*

Finally, the last one, a man of thirty-five, bespectacled, shaven-headed, severe. "Dr. Gellhorn," he said, "from Cologne."

A silly misunderstanding arose. Maigret asked him why, when his fellow passenger was discovered unconscious, he had done nothing about it.

"Because I'm not a doctor of medicine. I'm an archæologist."

By now the compartment was occupied as it had been the previous night:

Otto Braun	Adolphe Bonvoisin	Madame Irvitch
Thomas Hauke	Dr. Gellhorn	Lena Leinbach

Naturally, except for Otto Braun, henceforth incapable of giving evidence one way or another, each one protested entire innocence. And each one claimed to know nothing.

Maigret had already spent a quarter of an hour in another room with Jef Bebelmans, the acrobat from Antwerp who had appeared

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from under a carriage at Aulnoye carrying two to three million in bearer bonds. At first, when confronted with the corpse, Bebelmans had betrayed no emotion, merely asking, "Who is it?"

Then he had been found to be in possession of a third-class ticket from Berlin to Paris, although that had not prevented him spending part of the journey clinging to the bogies, no doubt to avoid declaring his bonds at the frontier.

Bebelmans, however, was not a talkative fellow. His one observation revealed a touch of humour: "It's your business to ask questions. Unfortunately, I have absolutely nothing to tell you."

The information on him was not too helpful, either: *Formerly an acrobat, he had since been a nightclub waiter in Brussels, and later in Berlin.*

"Well now," Maigret began, puffing away at his pipe despite the presence of the two women, "you, Bonvoisin, and Madame Irvitch were already in the train at Warsaw. Who got in at Berlin?"

"Madame was first," Bonvoisin said, indicating Lena Leinbach.

"And your cases, madame?"

She pointed to the rack above the dead man, where there were three luxurious crocodile cases, each in a fawn cover.

"So you put your luggage over this seat, and you sat down in the other corner. Diagonally opposite . . ."

"The dead man—I mean, that gentleman—came in next." Bonvoisin asked nothing better than to go on talking.

"Without luggage?"

"All he had with him was a travelling-rug."

Cue for consultation between Maigret and his nephew. New inventory of the dead man's wallet, in which a luggage slip was found. As the heavy baggage had by then reached Paris, Maigret sent telephone instructions that these pieces should be opened post haste.

"Good! Now, this gentleman—" He motioned towards Hauke.

"He got in at Cologne."

"Is that right, Monsieur Hauke?"

"To be precise, I changed compartments at Cologne. I was in a non-smoker."

Dr. Gellhorn, too, had got on at Cologne, where he lived. While Maigret, hands in pockets, was putting his questions, muttering away to himself, watching each of them in turn, Paul Vinchon, like a good secretary, was taking notes at a rapid rate.

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These notes read:

Bonvoisin: Until the German frontier, no one seemed to know anyone else, except for Madame Irvitch and myself. After the customs we all settled down to sleep as best we could, and the light was dimmed. At Liége I saw the lady opposite (Lena Leinbach) try to go out into the corridor. Immediately the gentleman in the other corner (Otto Braun) got up and asked her in German what she was doing. "I want a breath of air," she said. And I'm sure I heard him say, "Stay where you are."

Later in his statement Bonvoisin returned to this point:

At Namur she tried once more to get out of the train, but Otto Braun, who seemed to be asleep, suddenly moved, and she stayed where she was. At Charleroi they spoke to each other again, but I was falling asleep and have only a hazy recollection.

So, somewhere between Charleroi and Jeumont, in that hour and a half or so, one of the passengers must have made the fatal move, must have got up, approached Otto Braun, and plunged a needle into his heart.

Only Bonvoisin would not have needed to get up. He had only to move to the right to reach the German. Hauke's position, opposite the victim, was the next best, then came Dr. Gellhorn, and finally the two women.

Despite the cold, Maigret's forehead was bathed with sweat. Lena Leinbach watched him furiously, while Madame Irvitch complained of rheumatism and consoled herself by talking Polish to Bonvoisin.

Thomas Hauke was the most dignified of them all, and the most aloof, while Gellhorn claimed that he was missing an important appointment at the Louvre.

To return to Vinchon's notes, the following dialogue appears:

Maigret, to Lena: Where were you living in Berlin?

Lena: I was only there for a week. I was staying as usual at the Kaiserhof.

M: Did you know Otto Braun?

L: No. I may have run across him in the hall or the lift . . .

M: Why, then, after the German frontier did he start talking to you as if he knew you?

L: (dryly) Perhaps because he grew bolder away from home. In Germany a Jew is not allowed to make approaches to an Aryan woman.

M: Was that why he forbade you to get off the train at Liége and Namur?

L: He merely said I'd catch cold.

The questioning was still going on when there was a telephone call from Paris. Otto Braun's luggage—there were eight pieces

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—contained a great amount of clothing, and so much linen and personal stuff that one might have assumed the ex-banker was going off on a long trip, if not for ever. But no money—only four hundred marks in the notecase.

As for the other passengers: Lena Leinbach was carrying 500 French francs, 50 marks, 30 crowns; Dr. Gellhorn 700 marks; Thomas Hauke 40 marks and 20 French francs; Madame Irvitch 30 marks, 100 francs, and letters of credit on a Polish bank in Paris; Bonvoisin 12 zloty, 10 marks, 5,000 francs.

They still had to search the hand luggage that was in the compartment. Hauke's dressing-case held only one change of clothes, a dinner-jacket, and some underwear. In Bonvoisin's there were two marked packs of cards. But the real find came in Lena Leinbach's cases which, under the crystal-and-gold bottles, the fragile lingerie, and the gowns, had beautifully contrived false bottoms.

But the concealed compartments were empty. When questioned, all Lena Leinbach said was, " I bought these cases from a lady who went in for smuggling. They were a great bargain. *I've* never used them for anything like that."

Who had killed Otto Braun in the bluish half light of the compartment between Charleroi and Jeumont?

Paris was beginning to get worried. Maigret was summoned to the telephone. This business was going to cause a stir, and there would be complications. The numbers of the bonds found on Jef Bebelmans had been transmitted to the leading banks, and they seemed to be in order.

It was eleven o'clock when they started this laborious reconstruction in the railway carriage. It was two o'clock before they got out, and then only because Madame Irvitch fainted after declaring in Polish she could no longer bear the smell of the corpse.

Paul Vinchon was pale, for it seemed to him that his uncle was not showing his usual composure, that he was, in fact, dithering.

" It's not going well, Nunk? " he said in a low voice as they were crossing the tracks.

Maigret's only response was to sigh, " I wish I could find the needle. Hold them all another hour."

" But Madame Irvitch is ill! "

" What's that to do with me? "

" Dr. Gellhorn claims—"

" Let him," the Chief Inspector cut him short.

And he went off to lunch on his own at the station bar.

" Be quiet, I tell you! " Maigret snapped, an hour later. His nephew hardly knew where to look. " All you do is bring me

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trouble. I'm going to tell you my conclusions. After that, I warn you, you can get yourself out of this mess, and if you don't, you needn't bother to ring up your nunk. Nunk's had enough . . ."

Then, changing his tone, he went on, "Now! I've been looking for the one logical explanation of the facts. It's up to you to prove it, or to obtain a confession. Try to follow me.

"First, Otto Braun, with all his wealth, would not have come to France with eight cases and goodness knows how many suits—and, on the other hand, with precisely four hundred marks.

"Second, there must have been some reason for him to pretend during the German part of the journey not to know Lena Leinbach, and then as soon as they were over the Belgian border for them to be on the most familiar terms.

"Third, he refused to let her get out of the train at Liége, at Namur, and at Charleroi.

"Fourth, in spite of that she made several desperate attempts to get out.

"Fifth, a certain Jef Bebelmans, a passenger from Berlin who had never seen Braun—or he would have shown some sign on seeing the corpse—was found carrying two or three million in bonds."

And, still in a very bad temper, Maigret rumbled on, "Now I'll explain. Otto Braun, as a Jew, would like to see his fortune, or part of it, outside Germany. Knowing that his luggage will be minutely searched, he comes to an agreement with a demi-mondaine in Berlin, and has double-bottomed suitcases made for her, knowing that they stand less chance of being closely examined, being full of feminine articles.

"But Lena Leinbach, like all self-respecting members of her calling, has one real love: Thomas Hauke. Hauke, who is a specialist in this line, arranges with Lena in Berlin—perhaps even in the Kaiserhof—that he will make off with the bonds hidden in her cases.

"She gets on the train first, and puts the cases where Braun, still suspicious, has told her to put them. She sits down in the opposite corner, for they are not supposed to know each other.

"At Cologne Hauke, to keep an eye on things, comes to take his place in the compartment. Meanwhile another accomplice, probably a professional burglar, Jef Bebelmans, is travelling third with the bonds, and at each frontier has orders to get down for a spell underneath the carriage.

"Once the Belgian frontier is crossed, Otto Braun obviously runs no further risk. He could at any moment take it into his head to open his companion's cases and remove his bonds.

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That is why, first at Liége, then at Namur, and again at Charleroi, Lena Leinbach tries to get off the train and take French leave.

"Is Braun mistrustful? Does he suspect something? Or is he just in love with her? Whichever it is, he watches Lena closely, and she begins to panic, for in Paris he will inevitably discover the theft.

"He may even notice it at the French frontier where, having no reason to hide the bonds, he will want to open the concealed compartment. Thomas Hauke, too, must be aware of the situation—"

"And it's he who kills Braun?" Vinchon asked.

"I'm certain it is not. If Hauke had got up to do that, one or other of his travelling companions would have seen him. In my opinion, Braun was killed when you went past the first time, calling, 'Have your passports ready, please.'

"At that moment everyone got up, in the dark, still half asleep. Only Lena Leinbach had a reason to go over to Braun, press close to him to take down her cases, and I am convinced that it was at that moment—"

"But the needle?"

"Look for it!" Maigret grunted. "A brooch pin will do. If this woman had not happened on someone like you, who insisted on undressing the corpse, for a long time it would have seemed to be death from natural causes. It's all your fault that we're in this mess.

"Now draw up your plan. Make Lena think Bebelmans has talked, make Bebelmans think Hauke has been caught out—all the old dodges, eh?"

And he went off to have a beer while Vinchon did what his uncle had told him. Old dodges are good dodges because they work. In this case they worked because Lena Leinbach was wearing an enormous arrow-shaped pin of brilliants in her hat, and because Paulie, as Madame Maigret called him, pointing at it, said to her, "You can't deny it. There's blood on the pin!"

It wasn't true. But, for all that, she had a fit of hysterics and made a full confession.

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Translated by J. E. Malcolm

***INSPECTOR MAIGRET** solves a new problem in next month's Argosy*

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BIANCA and the Birds

By J. M. G. Luttman-Johnson

IN MANY villages bordering the bright Mediterranean, tiny cages imprisoning tiny birds are pinned to the whitewashed walls of the houses. If you walk down the narrow streets you will hear these birds singing, a sound so poignant it seems that their little hearts must burst.

You will hear them all along the shores of the warm south, but in Spain on the Costa del Sol there is a village where things are different—different because of an old man and his donkey.

The village is built on a cliff rising out of the blue sea. It is a fishing village, and to reach the boats peasants used a path which curled down beside a high white wall: a path of song and sea winds, of weariness and prayer—prayer above all, for in a niche in the white wall there stood a little wooden Madonna.

She was about two feet tall and exquisitely carved. Though she had the bleached, worn look of a woman who spends much time in the fields, the fisherfolk loved their Madonna. She was as poor as they, and it was to her they prayed, daily more desperately, for relief from their cruel poverty.

For several years there was little change. Then one summer a strange thing happened. Foreigners in search of sunshine discovered this quiet fishing village. Here they found a life nourishing to the spirit, and a people tough, valiant, courteous, and kind. They came in increasing numbers and paid generously for all they received.

Out of gratitude for their sudden wealth the fisherfolk built a fine church and had a splendid Madonna cast in Madrid. She was their pride, all of gold, with golden hair and a golden smile. They placed her in the great new church and surrounded her with candles.

Many foreigners decided to stay, so they built themselves

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villas and straight roads for their expensive cars. Thus it came about that the path which curved past the little Madonna fell out of use. No one walked that way now, no one, that is, except the old man and Bianca, his donkey.

As a baby, Bianca's furry coat had been as white as the white-washed walls of the houses. Her great eyes were like the deep purple stains on those shadowed walls. In the ecstasy of youth, her ears had pointed straight to heaven, but that was a long time ago. Today her coat was as yellow as a shroud. Nevertheless, she was the old man's dearest companion.

They lived both together in a room not far from the little Madonna. The old man's bed stood in one corner; in another was Bianca's straw, but they were seldom alone for the old man had a way with small creatures. Cats curled about his legs. Birds came to him as though drawn by a magnet. Hedgehogs arrived unannounced to drink at Bianca's side. He and Bianca were hosts to them all.

Hunger lines cut deep into the old man's face, but it was his eyes which held you. They were the eyes of a visionary set in a head that might have been drawn by El Greco, long and lean and strikingly beautiful.

The Holy Fathers recognised the old man as an original, a light-giver, and looked on him with charity; but at times he sorely distressed them for the old man's burden was his love for small and helpless things. And his love had its weaknesses.

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Stupid acts of cruelty so enraged him that he needed strong spirits to forget. Often he was drunk for days at a time, and this in a village of simple folk was a shameful thing.

Children adored him. Whenever they saw his tall figure astride the yellow donkey, they would run to him with eager voices, begging him to pause while they garlanded Bianca with wild flowers. And Bianca, flattered by their fuss, would place her great ears within their reach, chewing the flowers which escaped their busy hands until green and white froth fell from her mouth.

In the days of their youth, man and donkey moved across the hills as though they were part of nature. They collected wild thyme for the baker's furnace, and with the pesetas bought bread and wine and corn. They had no other needs.

But Spanish sunshine casts a spell, and often the old man would stretch himself on the stony ground, his hands behind his head, sharp knees pointing to heaven. There he would dream, with the dry scent of thyme about him and birdsong falling down, down from a great height.

At times he roused himself long enough to search in that Madonna-blue sky for the speck of a bird which enthralled him with its song. To the dreaming man there was no sweeter sound, but his joy in this had its dark side. The poignant songs which came from the caged birds so enraged him that for many years now he and Bianca had kept away from the narrow streets of their village.

When the hills became too steep for their ageing legs, they gathered driftwood on the beaches. Because their life kept to a pattern, it was some time before the old man noticed that the ways of the village had followed the new roads and that the path which led past the little Madonna was now deserted. No one came to her with his cares and prayers. No longer was she surrounded by flowers or greeted with the snatch of a song. It saddened him to discover that, since fortune had come their way, the fisherfolk had abandoned their wooden Madonna.

Thereafter, in order to console her, the old man used that path daily. He would stop and talk to her. He talked to the little Madonna as a man talks to a friend.

One evening he found in the drift of the tide a gull fouled by oil, and this made them later than usual. Eager to tell the Madonna, they hurried up the path.

As they approached the shrine, it seemed to the old man that the Madonna was smiling. He peered through the dusk. There, tucked between the folds of her cloak, almost under her chin, was a little brownbird. Even as the old man watched, the bird,

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making small comfortable sounds, fluffed out its feathers. The tiny thing was settling down for the night.

"Madre!" He whispered the word. "Madre mia! You have a little friend," and lest they should frighten it, he and Bianca moved off on soft feet.

The following evening the little brown bird returned. And so it happened throughout that winter. The Madonna was no longer lonely; and the old man, happy in her happiness, listened enraptured to the singing of a wild bird. And Bianca? I suspect Bianca recalled her youth on the thyme-covered hills, for she listened with both ears pointing to heaven.

Calm contented days continued until one evening the old man found the Madonna alone. Then he noticed in the dust of the path below the shrine a broken catapult and the prints of childish feet. Beside them lay two tiny brown feathers. Both were stained with blood.

"Madre mia!" The pain hurt him. Only then did he see above the heart of the little Madonna a single drop of blood.

"Gentle Mother of Mercy, you will forgive them but I cannot."

Back in their room the old man sat without moving, a blackness over his mind. At his feet an empty flagon lay on its side. Late that evening, fingers of darkness gutted the single candle. Bianca shivered all over in a single shiver. Suddenly the old man's voice attacked the silence.

"Bianca! I'm a dolt, a fool, a wine-witted idiot! Come, my little love. Our business is with the Holy Fathers." And he dragged her to her feet with drunken strength.

The noise and knocking on the Holy Fathers' door brought them running from their cells. Five boyish faces peered out. "What is it?" they asked. "What brings you here, old man, you and Bianca, at the dead of night?"

"A miracle, Holy Fathers! A miracle which you shall witness for yourselves if you will come with me now."

Because they believed in immanent miracles, they cried excitedly, "We will come." Each grabbed a lantern and, clutching their robes, they followed the old man into the night.

A strange procession they made, five pious priests bobbing down the dark streets behind a wine-flown, angry old man. But the village slept. Only the stars watched.

When they came to the shrine, the old man dismounted. On either side, the Holy Fathers held up their lanterns so that an arc of light fell across the little Madonna.

On her heart there glistened a single drop of blood like a great ruby tear.

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The old man, perhaps Bianca too, sighed in relief. The Holy Fathers crossed themselves.

"A miracle indeed," they said in awe, but they were puzzled. "Why has it happened? What does it mean?"

Then the old man spoke. "The little Madonna's heart is broken. Since the foreigners came and the great church was built, she has been forsaken. Loneliness has broken her heart."

"Can such a thing happen in our village?" The Holy Fathers, genuinely distressed, asked each other what should be done. Father Sebastian suggested placing her immediately beside the golden Madonna, but the old man would have none of it.

"The little Madonna," he said firmly, "has no love for riches. She is the Madonna of the winds and the clouds. She is the Madonna of small birds. You must place her in a garden, surrounded by trees with great branches in which they may rest."

The Holy Fathers thought this an excellent suggestion. Father Ignatius even went so far as to say he knew the exact spot in their very own garden.

The next day was a busy one. All the Holy Fathers helped. They built a pedestal for the little Madonna, and to delight her they made a fountain pool where birds might pause and drink and bathe and go singing on their way.

When all was ready, the little Madonna was carried reverently and placed on the pedestal. As the Holy Fathers knelt to ask her blessing, there burst from the trees the sweetest sound of birdsong ever heard in that garden.

That night when the Holy Fathers were deeply asleep, the old man and Bianca left their room to have a private word with the Madonna. What they said has never been told, but it is recorded that the next day there was the mark of peace on the old man's brow.

Everyone was happy for a year, that is, almost a year, for it needed just three days to the anniversary of the miracle of their Madonna. But this was a bad day for Father Ignatius. A waterpipe burst and, to save the cells from being flooded, the good Father had thrust his fist into the spurting pipe.

There he remained a prisoner until the old man and Bianca chanced to pass the window. "Help, old man! Help!" cried the Father. "Ride quickly to Pedro, and tell him to come with his tools. Hurry, for pity's sake."

So it came about that, because Pedro, the plumber, lived in the heart of the village, the old man rode down those narrow streets where small birds beat their wings in cages.

That night the old man was very drunk. He was drunk for a week, and the shame of it reached the ears of the Holy Fathers

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It was decided that Father Francis, the youngest of them all, should visit him and this he did after much prayer.

On a star-shot night in that humble room with Bianca's sighs stretching across it, a bargain was made.

The old man was bitter, roused to anger. Father Francis' replies were gentle and all love.

"Why do you presume to change me? A drunkard—a borrachon—yes, but whom do I harm? It were better for you to go among those who destroy small souls and torture helpless things. Father Francis—" the eyes that looked at the Holy Father were fierce and honest—"Father Francis, when they throw open every wire door and empty those diabolical cages, I swear to you that I will never drink again."

"If that is your promise, the cages shall be emptied."

"You think you will succeed?" It was the sceptic talking.

"Not I alone, but with the help of our little Madonna we could succeed."

"Once I had your faith. I am an old man now and emptied of hope and faith."

The next day all was bustle and bother amongst the Holy Fathers. Father Francis had suggested that to celebrate the first anniversary of the Madonna's arrival in their garden, they should have a great procession, with bells and acolytes and incense, from the church to the feet of their Madonna. Here all should be blessed by her. And so it was decided.

Father Francis, who took it upon himself to inform the people, was particularly busy. He walked up and down those narrow streets knocking at every door to give his message. Only at the houses where small cages were pinned to the walls did the message take longer. It went something like this: "Senora, our Madonna has a special blessing for the little ones. Since you have nine (or five or seven) niños, it would please the Holy Fathers if you brought her a gift."

Immediately, a hand would fly to some valuable trinket. "I should be happy to give this—or this."

"Our Madonna has no need of brooches, Mother, but," and Father Francis looked towards the tiny cage, "that little bird, that would indeed be a gift." And all were delighted with his suggestion.

So it happens that once a year in that Spanish village, the fisherfolk take down from the bright walls of their houses the tiny wire cages, and a great procession winds through the streets to the feet of the Madonna of Small Birds. Here wire doors are opened and, with a tumble of feathers, freed birds use their

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stiff wings to carry them to the nearest branches. While they rest before risking greater flight, their voices rise in wild, free happiness. Then all the people kneel to receive the Madonna's blessing.

This is not the end of the story, because the very first anniversary differed from all others in one respect.

On that special day, from beneath a distant tree, an old man and a little yellow donkey watched as the wire doors were opened. There were tears in the old man's eyes. Even before the Holy Fathers had collected all the empty cages, he turned and, putting his hand on Bianca's bridle, led her towards the little path where it had all started.

That night when the tired and happy people had closed their doors, Father Francis, chancing to look down from his window, saw the shadow of an old man standing before the Madonna. His head was bent in prayer. Never for a moment did Father Francis doubt that the other side of the bargain would be kept.

And in that garden, the night was so still you could have heard a bird fold its wings.

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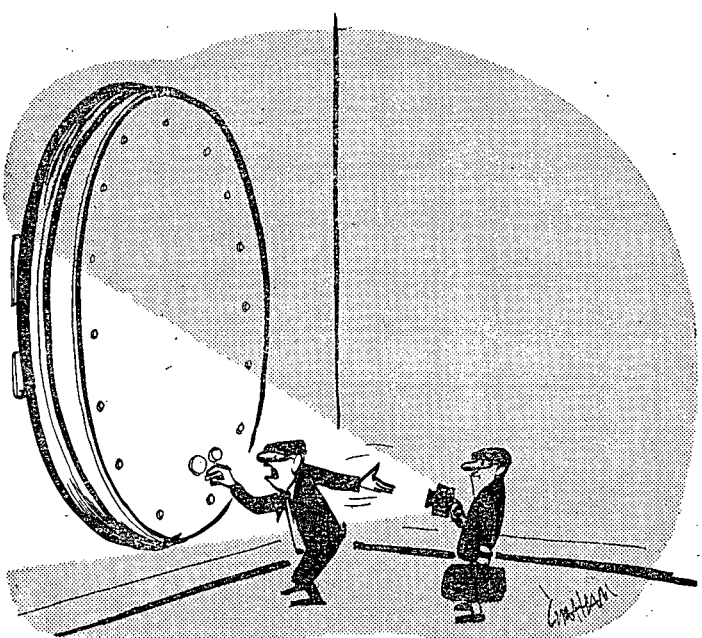

"Hairpin . . ."

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FISHY BUSINESS

She'll be back, he thought grimly, remembering the cut of her chin

By E. L. MALPASS

PATHETICALLY devoted to the piscatorial art, was Iestyn Pugh.

But unlucky, see. You would be as likely to find Rev. Edwards in the beer tent at the Eisteddfod as to find a fish swallowing Iestyn's bait.

And today was no exception. There he sat beside the canal, practising hard for the Dinas Piscatorial Society's Annual Angling Competition. And not a bite all day. Not even a preliminary survey of the tempting hook. And now the sun was becoming entangled in the willows. Time to go. Iestyn sighed. If only he could have had *one* bite. But no. Sadly he began to wind in his line.

And at that moment he felt a sharp double tug, as from a diver who sees a shark peering interestedly through the window of his helmet.

Hauled away, did Iestyn. A great pike here, he thought. A good omen; and in his mind's eye he already saw himself defeating Constable Protheroe, the present holder of the silver cup, a thing he wanted to do more than anything in the world. Daggers drawn, those two.

Eagerly he watched his line, waiting for those fishy jaws to break water. The taut line roved about the surface as it pulled up its burden. Iestyn watched, his pale, dark features wreathed in a smile of expectant delight. Then his face fell. For what had

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appeared was not a fish. It was a pair of pretty white hands, firmly clutching his line.

Iestyn, his eyes starting from his head, went on winding. Two white, wet arms appeared, tresses floated like weed on the surface; a pert, elfin face came up like moonrise.

He found himself looking into a pair of eyes as deep and clear and green as summer seas. The eyes looked at him. The pale lips opened. "Don't stop pulling," said an irritated voice.

Iestyn swallowed. He looked up and down the canal bank anxiously. Didn't fancy having one of the Deacons from Bethel putting a false interpretation on this. But he saw only the willows, sleeping the summer away, and the green reeds ranked like soldiers, and the long, sunlit highroad of the water. And no one about for miles.

So he pulled. And out came the rest of the young person. And dressed in nothing but a few strands of waterweed! Blushed to the roots of his hair, did Iestyn. Nonplussed, too. "Been for a swim, is it, then?" he asked, making an attempt at conversation.

But still dangling, the lady was. She kicked out with her legs, swung herself over the bank and landed, dripping and wriggling like any fish, in Iestyn's lap.

Not used to coping with situations like this, was Iestyn. But he was a thoughtful youth. "Cold you are," he said kindly. "Some hot cocoa from my vacuum, is it? And a corned beef sandwich, maybe? Eaten all the fishpaste ones, but—" He pulled up short. "There is tactless," he told himself angrily. "Talking about her cousins, for all I know."

But she was looking at him adoringly. "What is your name, mortal?" she asked, making herself comfortable.

"Iestyn Pugh. What is yours?"

"Undine." The green eyes gazed into his. Then she wound her white arms about his neck, and kissed him passionately on the lips.

Not much wrong with that, that Iestyn could see. Reciprocated, he did. And pleased he was to find only the very slightest taste of fish, no more than when he swallowed his halibut liver oil capsules.

She nuzzled up against him. "Where do you live, Iestyn?" she asked.

"In the village," he said. "With Mrs. Pugh, my mam."

Gentle as little waves caressing the stones of a moonlit shore, was her voice. "Take me with you, Iestyn," she murmured. "Take me with you, home."

Absentmindedly embracing the creature, Iestyn had been.

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Now he unwound his arms as though she had suddenly become red hot. "But I could not do that," he gasped.

"Why not?" The clear eyes clouded, like a wind-fretted sea.

"My—my mam would not like it," he stammered. "Very particular, my mam."

She laid her cold cheek against his. "Take me with you," she said again. "I love you, Iestyn."

"No," he said, struggling to get up. "Back into the canal with you, now, good girl."

But her arms were about his neck once more, her lips on his. "What do you want most in all the world?" she whispered.

"To beat Constable Protheroe in the Dinas Piscatorial Society's Annual Angling Competition," he said promptly.

Hurt she looked, for a minute. Then she laughed.

"Simple," she said. "If I help you win, will you take me home and marry me?"

He thought of the silver cup, with his name on it: Iestyn Glendower Pugh. He took a deep breath. "Very well," he said. "It is a bargain."

She kissed him fondly, and wriggled from his lap, and slipped down into the green water. And once again there was only Iestyn, and the quiet willows, and the westering sun.

But what a different scene on the day of the Annual Angling Competition. All is bustle and excitement, the competitors perched on their little stools, and the judges going up and down with their scales, and the president himself there, very portentous behind his watch chain. "Hope you will manage to catch something this year, Pugh," he says to Iestyn, very reproving.

And Huw Protheroe, the reigning champion, calls out, nasty, "Thought you would have brought a net and a jamjar this time, Iestyn. Stood more chance of catching something, maybe."

"Beat you with one hand tied behind my back, Mr. Protheroe," Iestyn shouted back. Angry and very hurt, he was. And not pinning much faith on that Undine, either. Nothing that he could see to show she was on duty down there. Not at all sure now, even, that he wanted her help, if it meant marrying her afterwards.

Sick with anxiety, he was. Disgraced for ever he would be if he caught nothing for the fifth year in succession. And not in much better state if he married Undine. With a heavy heart he lowered his line into the water.

And there he sat. Constable Protheroe was already pulling them in, calling out in his nutmeg-grater voice, "See this monster,

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Iestyn?" or "Come on, Pugh, let's see you catch something, man."

Hateful it was. Iestyn was almost in tears. At this moment he would have married a whole harem of Undines just to see his float move. But there it stayed, still as a dead man's nose.

"Protheroe looks like winning again," said the president, rubbing his hands. But at that moment something happened.

To everyone's astonishment Iestyn's float shot below the surface. Hardly could he believe his eyes. He wound in.

The biggest pike he had ever seen was on the end of his line. With trembling hands he removed it from the hook, put on more bait, and cast again. Down went the float. Up came another pike.

Never had the Piscatorial Society seen anything like this. Knee deep in fish, Iestyn was in no time. Soon the president and the judges were all clustered round him, and at last Constable Protheroe flung his tackle into the water and came to watch the perspiring Iestyn pulling them in.

Pandemonium it was. There was that Undine, sticking her fishy cousins on the hook almost faster than Iestyn could pull them out. Up they came, sometimes in twos and threes. Some even emerged from the water backwards; which prompted Constable Protheroe to remark, very thoughtfully, that never before in the whole of his angling experience had he known a fish to impale itself deliberately by the tail.

But there could be no doubt of the result. When time was called, the score stood as follows:

Iestyn Pugh: 25 perch, 23 pike, 14 tench, 10 carp, 73 minnow.
Huw Protheroe: 3 perch.
The rest: Nil.

Oh, very proud Iestyn was when, in The Angler's Arms, the president handed him the first prize. But that evening, when Mrs. Pugh asked him, "Cocoa in the silver cup tonight, is it, boy?" he passed a hand wearily over his brow and said, "No, thank you, Mam. Coronation mug as usual," for he had remembered what, in the excitement of the day, he had forgotten: his bargain with Undine.

But he was a man of honour, was Iestyn. And as soon as he had finished his cocoa he set off for the canal bank, to face whatever had to be.

Soon he was in the lanes, and the old moon went with him, watching him like a cat watching a mouse. Very quiet it was, not a leaf stirring, not a sound of man or animal. The moonlight lay on the wide landscape, stilling it like fallen snow.

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Iestyn went on, across fields now, the dewy grass whispering about his feet. He could see the old green canal, quicksilver under the moon. And he was afraid. But he went bravely up to the bank, and peered down into the water.

Nothing stirred. And then—what was that? Something drifting below the surface. A patch of weed? Or the tresses of Undine? Iestyn trembled. And then his heart leapt like a ball tossed skyward, as a waterfowl crashed squawking out of the reeds and drew a furrow across the polished water.

And in the ripples he saw a face: a pale face that broke into a hundred pieces, and re-formed, and broke again. The face of Undine or just the old moon? He did not know. With a dreadful cry he turned and ran, away from the chill water and the shadows of the willows, and he did not stop running until he was safe in the lamplight of his mother's kitchen.

"Well, there is panting you are," said Mrs. Pugh. "Been seeing ghosts, is it?" But Iestyn went up to his room, and peeped out anxiously through the curtains. But there was only the moon, and the night was still.

A change of scene, now. Off with the moonlight. Fade out the stars. Paint the sky the most delicate blue possible. A backcloth of mountains, sparkling like new; mist in the valleys, mist creeping about the streets of the little town. Cockcrow, and don't overdo the larksong.

Iestyn dreamt he was among the dreadful corries of the hills, and all about him the sound of streams. Then he awoke, and still he heard the sound of water, but far away; and nearer it came, nearer, and the sound of the water was calling his name, Iestyn Pugh, Iestyn Pugh, and it was no longer the sound of water but the voice of a girl, calling his name.

Out of bed he leapt, and ran to the window. And there, skipping along in the road, shrouded in mist but in very little else, was Undine.

And all up and down the street, curtains were being pulled to one side; and pale, chapel-going Welsh faces were peering with horror and interest at what promised to be the most exciting piece of scandal of their lives.

Iestyn ran downstairs, snatched his old mackintosh off the hook, and out into the street.

"My love!" cried Undine, delightedly flinging wide her arms.

"Never mind that now," Iestyn said. He put the mackintosh about her shoulders, and steered her into the house.

"Well, did you see that?" said the neighbours, tight-lipped.

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"Shameful, it is." And they dressed eagerly, feeling that this, at least, was one blue day that would not slip useless away . . .

"Who is it, Iestyn?" That was Mrs. Pugh from upstairs.

A difficult question. Not one you could answer satisfactorily shouting up the banisters. So Iestyn said nothing. He looked at Undine, who was sitting on the sofa. Very small and feminine she looked, in the big mackintosh, her dark, lovely hair about her shoulders, her eyes huge and wondering.

"Back you must go, at once," he whispered urgently.

"But I've only just come," she said, pouting. Then her eyes lit up. "Oh, isn't that beautiful," she cried, and Iestyn found she was gazing at the silver cup that stood so proudly on the dresser.

"Give it me," she said.

"No—er, not now," said Iestyn. But Undine's eyes remained fastened on the cup.

And then Mrs. Pugh was coming down the stairs. "What a smell of damp," she was saying. "Water in the cellar again, is it?" And then she came in and saw Undine. "Well, whatever next?" she cried.

"This is Undine, Mam," said Iestyn miserably. "From the canal," he explained.

Mrs. Pugh peered. "Lewis the Lock's daughter, is it?" she asked. "Grown you have, my dear."

"She lives *in* the canal," said Iestyn. "What you might call a water sprite, I suppose."

"Well, whatever would the Rev. Edwards say?" asked Mrs. Pugh. But her hospitality got the better of her curiosity and she said, "Does the young person eat breakfast, Iestyn?"

"Yes," said Undine.

"Kippers it is," Mrs. Pugh said doubtfully. "So maybe you would prefer me to boil you an egg."

A bit lost, Undine looked. But she nodded vaguely, and Mrs. Pugh bustled into the scullery.

Iestyn looked at Undine. There she sat, swinging her legs, her hands engulfed by the great mackintosh, her pretty little face determined but scared, her eyes now on Iestyn, now on the cup. Oh, very pathetic she looked among these big clumsy mortals. And what a day that was for a creature used to the quiet gloom of the canal bottom.

Breakfast had hardly begun before Mrs. Owen was at the door for a screw of tea, staring round the birdcage at Undine and pretending not to. Until Undine, cheerfully munching her boiled egg like an apple, shell and all, put out her tongue. Mrs. Owen withdrew, well satisfied, and went round to see Mrs.

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Protheroe, the small pale mother of the large red constable. ("Surprise me it would, Mrs. Protheroe, if there was very much under that mackintosh. And her table manners!")

Then it was Mrs. Protheroe, very friendly. "Heard you'd got company, Mrs. Pugh, thought you might like to borrow the camp bed."

"Very kind of you, Mrs. Protheroe. But the young person will not be staying the night."

"Tell her you are going to marry me, Iestyn," commanded Undine, spitting out eggshell.

Oh, dreadful the silence then in the little kitchen. Mrs. Protheroe, who had been hovering in the doorway, flung good manners to the winds, and marched into the room. Iestyn, very pale, rose to his feet and said, "Mam, going to marry Undine I am. Because I promised."

"But you can't—" Mrs. Pugh's voice became a wail.

"What's wrong with water sprites?" asked Undine, her eyes flashing. Quick tempered, that girl, for all her shyness.

Drinking in every word, Mrs. Protheroe was.

"Iestyn is not marrying any water sprite," Mrs. Pugh announced firmly.

"I'm staying here till he does, anyway," said Undine.

Iestyn groaned in spirit. "Great Uncle Pugh married a Scotswoman," he said mutinously.

"And a fine example he is to quote," flared up Mrs. Pugh, "him dying of strong liquor at the age of forty-two."

"Anyway, I am going to marry her, and that is flat," said Iestyn.

"And what will the bank say?" snapped Mrs. Pugh, white now about lips and nostrils.

A good point that. Worked in the bank, did Iestyn, very respectable. And the bank not likely to look with favour on their staff marrying someone who might be blood relation to a perch.

"To hell with the bank," cried Iestyn, banging the table so that the plates danced.

Serious, this was. Never before had Iestyn said, "To hell with the bank," even at the half-yearly balance.

"What is all this talk of a bank?" asked Undine, understandably confused; the only bank she knew was the one that ran beside the canal.

"Quiet, you," snapped Iestyn's mother.

Well, there was a situation. Enthralled, Mrs. Protheroe was. Until Mrs. Pugh looked at her nasty and said, "Time you were going, is it, Mrs. Protheroe?"

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"Just off," said Mrs. Protheroe cheerfully. After all, she couldn't hope to stay all morning, and she was anxious to tell the story to her big strong son.

She went. "Now!" said Mrs. Pugh dreadfully, putting her hands belligerently on her hips.

But at that moment a great hullabaloo at the front door, knocking and banging and ringing all at the same time. Iestyn went for a bit of peace. But he wished he hadn't. For into the house bounced Evans the Bank. Fat and fussy, that one.

"What is this?" he cries. "Sick, is it? Ten o'clock, and customers pouring into the bank like the Blessed through the Pearly Gates on Resurrection Morn. And not a penny piece for one of them. And for why? Because you—" and he pointed a stubby finger at Iestyn—"you hold the strongroom keys."

Iestyn said nothing. Feeling tired he was by this time. But Undine rose, and came and clung to his arm, and said to Mr. Evans, "Iestyn is going to marry me."

"And who are you, madam?" asked the bank manager, eyebrows up.

"I am a water sprite," said Undine.

"Bank managers do not believe in water sprites," said Mr. Evans. "Part of our training," he explained politely.

"I'm one, anyway," pouted Undine.

And Mr. Evans, watching her face, saw a shadow pass across it like a breeze passing over a mere; and looking into her eyes he felt himself drifting and drowning in cool green depths. He shook his head, eyes closed, as though emerging from water. "Then you cannot marry one of my staff, madam," said Mr. Evans.

"We'll see about that," said Undine.

"We shall indeed," said Iestyn sadly.

But Mr. Evans had suddenly remembered more important things.

"Come along, Pugh, come along," he said testily. "What about those keys?"

Patted his hip pocket, did Iestyn. "Only if you promise to let me marry Undine," he said, drawing the little creature closer to him.

"Oh, blow Undine," exploded Mr. Evans.

"And blow the bank," said Iestyn.

Sacrilege and blasphemy this was to Mr. Evans. He drew himself up to his full five feet. "Take a month's notice, Pugh," he said. "And marry whom you like."

Then Iestyn, one arm round his pretty Undine, made the most determined speech of his life. He said, "If it is a choice

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of Undine or the bank, Mr. Evans, I must choose Undine because I gave my word."

Threw her apron over her head at that, did Mrs. Pugh, and abandoned herself to misery.

"Oh, hand over those damn keys and let me be off," said Mr. Evans. Iestyn tossed him the bunch. "And never darken the doors of the bank again," Mr. Evans said. He went.

Mournful it was in the kitchen, now, with Mrs. Pugh rocking rhythmically to and fro and moaning through her apron, and Iestyn and Undine holding hands on the sofa.

Very depressed, Iestyn felt. Bad enough having to marry a water sprite, without losing his job into the bargain. Not for the first time, he found himself wishing he were less high principled.

Undine, too, did not seem very happy. Kept looking at the weeping Mrs. Pugh. "Almost as damp here as on the canal bottom," she said disgustedly; at which callous remark Mrs. Pugh rose and ran howling from the room.

But worse was to come, far worse. A knocking at the door again. Iestyn disengaged his fingers from Undine's, and went and opened.

A grim, purposeful body of men crowded on the doormat. The Management Committee of the Dinas Piscatorial Society. Into the hall they jostled. "Come to take back the silver cup we have," the president said in a dreadful voice, looking at Iestyn very baleful.

"But—? The cup? I do not understand," said Iestyn.

"Putting two and two together, Huw Protheroe has been," said the president. "As a result, the committee has ruled yesterday's competition null and void. The cup will be returned to the previous holder."

"To P.C. Protheroe?" asked Iestyn piteously. A bitter moment, that.

"Even so," said the president.

"But what am I—?" began Iestyn. Then he decided on a bold stroke. "Nothing in the club rules about water sprites, if that is what you are thinking," he said defiantly.

"There soon will be. The constitution is being rewritten. Now where is this cup? We haven't got all day, man."

They surged down the little hall like a rugger scrum. Iestyn, struggling to hold them back, was bustled ruthlessly to one side. They burst into the kitchen. Their eyes travelled to the dresser. "Where's the cup, Pugh?" the president asked quietly.

"It—it was on the dresser," stammered Iestyn.

"Not there now, is it, boy?" The president put his hands in

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his pockets, rocked to and fro on his heels. "Better find it soon, hadn't you?"

"But it's gone," said Iestyn, bewildered. "Stolen, it must have been."

"So I see," said the president. "Come on, boys. Let us leave Iestyn to his searching. If he does not find it and return it to my house this evening, prison it will be for him for sure."

They filed out, each one of them avoiding meeting Iestyn's eyes.

Panic-stricken he was, now. Pledged to marry a water sprite, dismissed the bank, and the shades of the prison house closing about him. Who could have taken that cup? He and his mother had scarcely left the kitchen all morning, and Undine—why, Undine had been there all the time. In bewilderment he turned to her.

The big mackintosh was still sitting on the sofa. But it was empty. With a sinking heart Iestyn knew where the cup had disappeared to—the bottom of the canal!

Then his heart rose again. Perhaps it was worth going to prison if Undine had grown homesick. But it was a fleeting hope. She'll be back, he thought grimly, remembering the cut of her chin. Why, she might even have taken the cup as a sort of hostage, to increase her hold on him.

Suddenly he came to life, and ran out of the kitchen, out into the busy streets and into the quiet lanes and on to where the canal dreamed and steamed in the sunlight. And there, on the opposite bank, stroking the smooth sides of the cup, smiling an elfin smile, was Undine.

No swimmer, Iestyn. "Undine," he called. "Come over here. Give me that cup."

She did not move. Iestyn ran to an old lockgate. He climbed on to the great black-painted beams. He began, unsteadily, to walk across, his eyes fastened on that precious cup.

But halfway his foot slipped. Down he went, throwing up a great fountain of spray.

"Whoops," cried Undine, leaning over the water the better to see the fun.

Down for a long time was Iestyn. And pretty well water-logged when he at last reached the surface. But Fate had not done with him yet. "Disporting yourself in the canal, is it, Iestyn Pugh, in contravention of the bye-laws?" boomed a stern voice. And there on the bank was P.C. Protheroe.

Undine looked up. "Oh, what a beautiful man," she cried, and dropping the silver cup on the grass she crossed the canal with a neat overarm stroke and climbed out and sat gazing

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adoringly at Constable Protheroe, her pretty chin cupped in her hands. "*Aren't* you beautiful!" she cried.

"Maybe," said Constable Protheroe modestly.

"Such a lovely red face. And all those bright, silver buttons."

"Help," cried Iestyn. "Help!"

But no one took any notice of him. For Undine had stood up and slipped an arm into the policeman's and, with her head resting on his beautiful blue uniform, was toying with one of his bright buttons. "Shall we take a stroll, mortal?" she suggested.

"Yes, indeed," said Constable Protheroe, slipping an arm about her slim waist. They wandered off towards a neighbouring spinney.

"I hope you meet the Chief Constable," shouted Iestyn, jealous in spite of himself. But there was no reply. Wearily he pulled himself on to the far bank, and seized the cup, and lay oozing in the noonday hush.

Very unpredictable things, water sprites, and no mistake.

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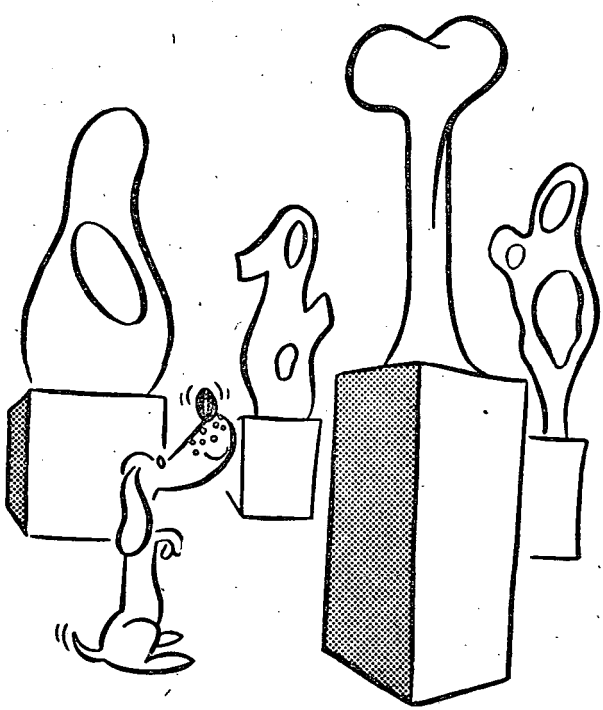

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Frills and Furbelows

"To dress you becomingly is the first necessity, child," said the Dowager. "The sight of you in that shabby gown makes me nervous!"

GEORGETTE HEYER, *Sylvester*

I was a bustle-maker once, girls,
Many, many years ago;
I put my heart in the bustle-maker's art,
And I don't mind saying so . . .
I built bustles for the slender;
I built bustles for the stout;
I built bustles for the girls with muscles
And bustles for the girls without.
I built bustles by the thousands once
In the good old days of yore;
But things have decayed in the bustle-making trade,
And I don't build bustles any more.

PATRICK BARRINGTON, *I Was a Bustle-Maker Once, Girls*

Haute Couture

Besides frocks, Kuniang required riding-breeches, and for these we went to Ah-ting-fu's new shop in the Hata Mên. I said I would wait outside with Uncle Podger, but Kuniang had hardly entered the shop when she appeared once more at the door and beckoned to me. "You must see this," she said. "It is as good as the Heavenly Trousers."

I was puzzled, but followed her indoors. A rickety wooden staircase led to an upper floor, and on the wall above the steps was a notice in English:

LADIES HAVE FITS UPSTAIRS

Kuniang laughed delightedly. "You cannot possibly leave me to have a fit all by myself," she said. "Please come too."

So I followed her up the staircase.

DANIELE VARE, *The Maker of Heavenly Trousers*

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Brisk music gayer scenes announces,
And in a half-dressed danseuse bounces,
With arms that wreathe, and eyes that swim,
And drapery that scarce shades each limb . . .
When Mary saw her vault in air,
Her snow-white tunic leaving bare
Her limbs—and heard the deafening shout
Grow louder as she whirled about,
With one leg pointing towards the sky
As if the Gallery to defy
Surprised, and shocked, she turned away,
Wondering how women e'er could stay,
And thinking men must sure be frantic
Who patronised such postures antic . . .

LADY BLESSINGTON, *The Belle of a Season*

Space Suit

The mirror tilted and he slid into a hole that wasn't there before.

He came out into a square blue room.

His three blondes were there, watching him.

We don't get pink elephants. We don't get snakes and bugs. We get blondes.

He stood up, too aware of his nudity. They watched him calmly, ignoring it. "Now, look," he said, "can't we be friends?"

They had changed. Their mouths were different vivid green paint in a perfect rectangle. They looked at him with the calm pride of ownership. Nice doggy.

"Now look," he began again, and stopped when he noticed their strange dresses. He looked closer. Ladies, please, you can't dress with a paint spray. But they had.

JOHN D. MACDONALD, *Game for Blondes*

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. . . All women of whatever age, rank, profession or degree, whether virgins, maids or widows, that shall, from and after such an Act, impose upon, seduce and betray into matrimony any of His Majesty's subjects, by the scents, paints, cosmetic washes, artificial teeth, false hair, Spanish wool, iron stays, hoops, high-heeled shoes (or) bolstered hips, shall incur the penalty of the law in force against witchcraft and like misdemeanours and that the marriage, upon conviction, shall become null and void. *Proposed Act of Parliament*, 1770

My Love in her Attyre doth shew her witt,
It doth so well become her;
For ev'ry season she hath dressings fit,
For Winter, Spring, and Summer.
No Beautie shee doth misse
When all her Robes are on:
But Beautie's selfe she is
When all her Robes are gone. ANON, 1602

Dernier Cri

. . . How the Duchess of Manchester, in getting too hastily over a stile, " caught a hoop of her cage in it and went regularly head over heels lighting on her feet with her cage and whole petticoats remaining above, above her head. They say there was never such a thing seen—and the other ladies hardly knew whether to be thankful or not that a part of her underclothing consisted in a pair of scarlet tartan knickerbockers (the things Charlie shoots in)—which were revealed to the view of all the world in general and the Duc de Malakoff in particular "—whose subsequent description, " ma chère, c'était diabolique! " seems inadequate. *Letters of the Hon. Eleanor Stanley*, 1859

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SAILORS' LEGENDS

I felt like
the only man in the world

BY NICHOLAS DEE

OH, that was a pretty place! The road corkscrewed down to it, so deep, so green between those high banks, and silent all the way, but for a distant lark overhead like a watch ticking in the sky. Often there would be a mist with the sun peering through it and all the drops on the telegraph wires and thorn hedges shining brighter than angels' eyes.

It was the stillness, the green breathing dampness, the stretches of light reflected up to the sky from the wet road that stayed in your mind, and the scent of primroses. I believe they had primroses all the year round, though they said not.

The first time I went I'd been washed up from a wreck: tossed like a bit of flotsam on to a black rock of those northern cliffs. I clambered up, blind and dazed from spray and battering, dragging my sea-chest behind me. When I got to the top I looked back: miles and miles of hungry foam, snarling and curling; no sign of ship or shipmates save a spar or two floating in the dark blue. Later I learnt they'd all been picked up by an Atlantic liner but at the time I felt like the only man in the world.

I was strung out tight: next to playing my last note. I stumbled on, over the heather and gorse, towards Fernhoe. Only I didn't know it then. All of a sudden, the land began to fold in, the sky began to open out, and I was at the head of that lane, Sugarfoot Lane some of them called it, or Deepsea Lane.

Down I went. There wasn't a bird singing in the whole parish; only sometimes a curlew tuning up his sad scale. At every turn I expected houses, for there was a lived-in feel to the lane, purposeful. It was going somewhere as fast as it could. Sometimes a stream galloped by the road, sometimes great yews brooded guard on the bank or an avenue of silvery beeches kept me company along a stretch of the way. Then over a bit of hilltop and down I plunged into the steepest, deepest-arched hollow that ever carried a human foot.

This would be the place for snowdrops, I thought, and then I was round a corner and out in the village.

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White houses, set about all anyhow, a bit of grass in the middle where the brook ran chuckling, fuchsias, palms, and cabbages all tangled up.

A boy was chopping logs on an open patch by the nearest house. I jerked down my box out of my stiffened arm and crossed over to him. He stood up, smiling, screwing his eyes against the bright sky. Eighteen or nineteen he would be, brown-haired and blue-eyed the way they come sometimes in the West Country, his head the shape and colour of a glossy hazelnut.

"Can I get a bed in this village?" I asked.

"My mother, Widow Santo, sometimes puts up sailors," he said.

"I'm a sailor," I told him. "I've been washed ashore up back over. The ship went down last night—*Happy Alice*, from Bristol."

"It's a bad coast," he said, nodding. He lifted his axe and dropped it into a block of wood, shook the hair from his eyes, and said, "I'll take you to her."

She put you in mind of an orchard, the Widow Santo: fresh and peaceful and sweet-smelling. She gave me a basin of soft cold water to wash in, and I flung myself out on a white coverlid and slept the day out and the dusk in.

"It's a quiet place, Fernhoe," she said at teatime. "Nobody talks much here. And in Coldharbour they never talk at all."

"Where's Coldharbour?"

"Up the valley." She pointed west. "Follow the road, follow the stream, and you'll come to it. Beyond Coldharbour you can't go. The moor closes in and the cliffs reach back. They don't get much disturbance up there. When folks think it's not peaceful enough here they mostly go on up to Coldharbour."

Fernhoe certainly wasn't what you'd call a noisy place. You could hear a cock crow good morning, or the clink of a spade on stone, and that was about all. But Coldharbour was quieter still.

I walked up there when I'd rested two or three days. The village was smaller than Fernhoe, and all set round a bridge over the stream, full here, smooth and noiseless. Old men leaned in the sunshine, roses in their buttonholes, smoking their pipes, and their wives sat podding peas in doorways. They smiled as you went by but never spoke.

Past the village the hill ran up sharply to a cliff. Sometimes, standing there, you could feel rather than hear a distant boom and thump as the sea cast itself angrily against rocks beyond and to the north. A kind of hum and shiver ran through the village then, and there would be silence until the next time.

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"The valley curves round, you see, like a horseshoe, us at one end and them at the other," Charley Santo said one evening as he sat putting a whipping on a bit of rope. "You're nearer to the sea in Coldharbour than you are here."

"You'd do well for a sailor," I told him, watching his skilful hands. "Ship along with me next time?"

"I'll never leave here." His smile was broad and I knew he wouldn't budge; one might as well try to get a bird to leave its nest and live in one's pocket.

"Well, I must be off," I said to Mary Santo one day. "Time I was finding another ship. I shall miss you and Charley though, I've been right happy here."

"You'll come back," she said. "People mostly do."

She was right, I felt.

"Can I leave my chest here?" I asked. "There's nothing in it but old rubbish. It's not worth the carrying."

She hesitated. I had a sort of hope she'd say yes. Wandering as I knew myself to be, I thought that chest would pull me back. But finally she shook her head.

"It might bring bad luck," she said. "Things left unused go stale and turn to poison. You'd best take it with you."

And so she waved me off, with Charley beside her.

I shipped on a china-clay boat at St. Maul, and soon after my luck began to turn. I had one bit of fortune and then another; a good win, a windfall from an old aunt, a share in a piece of salvage, and in no time I was buying my own old tramp from a master who'd taken to drink and let her go downhill. *Katharina*, she was called, a Norwegian boat.

Only one of the crew came with her, a boy who'd just signed on. His name was Lars, and he came from some skerry in the far north where the sun shines at midnight and they have moss instead of grass. Lars was about seven feet tall, long and lanky, with a mop of lint-coloured hair and a strawberry-burnt nose.

"Hey!" I said the first day, when he nearly dropped a tar-drum on my head. "How long have you been at sea?"

With a grin he told me he'd just left college, this was his first trip.

"But I'll soon learn," he said. He did too. He was quick and handy: a good boy.

He had a fiddle with him and in between times he'd sit on the coaming and fetch tunes from it that shook your heart into a dance, or made the blood run cold and slow in your veins from grief; it seemed queer to me sometimes that he had all that joy and amazement and despair locked up in him and yet didn't know it; when he put the violin down he was just seven feet of lanky

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boy. He used to fool about with the men, and called me Paparuto, out of some book he'd been reading. From another boy I wouldn't have taken it, but he meant it in fun, no disrespect. He was a good boy.

One evening—it was off Gibraltar, warm and still—I remember a whole navy of swallows had settled in the rigging and were keening and whistling; he'd been playing his fiddle, and when he'd put it by and the men who had been clustered to listen had drifted away, I suddenly thought to tell him about Fernhoe and Coldharbour and the widow and Charley Santo.

It seemed odd to think of larks and primroses in this warm Mediterranean dusk with the gaggle of shipping round us, guttural shouts and accordion music coming from the Italian coaster alongside.

Lars was keen to hear all I could tell him. "It sounds like a place I read about once in a book," he said. A great one for reading, he was.

"I'd like you to meet Charley Santo," I said. Somehow I felt the two boys ought to know one another, almost that they belonged together. But Charley had a peacefulness in him that was lacking from Lars, who was restless and teasing as a fox cub; it seemed to me that Charley could teach Lars something important.

Oddly, although Lars liked to hear about the village and several times asked me to describe it again, he always turned sulky if I said too much about Charley. It seemed to bring uppermost a childish, unhappy side of his nature. Finally, I decided this was because of his boyhood. His mother had run away soon after he was born and her name was never spoken. His father, a pastor, was a harsh, silent man, turned in on himself. In that solitary place the boy had been his own company, or had found it from books and his fiddle. Until he went to college he'd never met boys of his own age.

"Did you never see your mother again?" I asked him once.

"She died . . . No, I never saw her. I found a picture of her once."

He showed it me, much rubbed and with a furry sheen from travelling in his wallet—you couldn't distinguish much beyond a fair-haired laughing face resting on interlinked fingers the way they used to take pictures. She had a look of Lars though, you could see that. I would have been curious to meet her—this mother who could run off and leave her boy.

Of course I wanted to take him to Mary Santo.

Well, we roamed about the salt-water world and, it may have been the next Christmas after that—Christmas time it was at all

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events—we fetched up at Plymouth. You'll hardly believe it, but I was excited as a boy at the thought of seeing my friends at Fernhoe and taking them presents. Naturally I wanted Lars to come along with me and be introduced.

At first he seemed willing enough, but we had to spend two or three days in Plymouth while I was busy with refitting, and during that time he took up with a girl. To hear him speak you'd think she was the eighth wonder of the world, but I had plenty friends in Plymouth and before long I heard a tale or two about her that made me worry. Melina Yeo, her name was, half Greek, half Devon, a slippery mixture. The boy was mad about her, and when, on the afternoon of Christmas Eve, my jobs done, I invited him to come over to Fernhoe with me, he fell into a silent sulk. Melina wanted him to take her out that evening, it seemed, though he'd taken her out every evening past, and spent every penny of his money on her.

In the end I made him come, almost by force.

The coach didn't go all the way. We had to take it to a cross-roads on the moor, then get out and walk. I'd have liked to get away earlier, but was held up, waiting for a delivery of stores, and early winter dusk was falling when we started.

You can guess what happened. Before we'd walked a couple of miles of the ten that lay between us and Fernhoe it was black dark and snow was beginning to fall. After an hour or so I had to confess I must have missed my landmarks and was properly lost.

We were lucky to find a barn with some hay in it, high up on the moor, where we had to resign ourselves to spending Christmas Eve.

Lars was in a black temper. I'd never known him quite like it before. Usually he came out of his sulks quick enough.

"To think I could have been with Melina," he muttered to himself as we made the best of the scanty hay, more than half marsh reed and thistle.

"You be thankful you're not, my lad," I said, provoked by my own failure to find the way. "She'd be picking your bones by this time. Where I'm taking you the people help sailors, they don't rob them."

"Where you're taking me!" he cried angrily. "Where you're taking me doesn't exist! Haven't you realised that yet? It's a dream village, it's not on any map. Of course you haven't found it, and you never will! I know all about it. It's in Homer and the Norse sagas and the Red Indian legends—"

"Do you mean to tell me that you've sat there listening to me talk about the place and you haven't believed me—?"

"Of course I haven't believed you," he said. "Oh, I know

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you believed it—but you were sleepwalking, or shocked, it was all a hallucination! This Fernhoe of yours is no more than a sailor's myth! "

" I'll show you in the morning that it isn't," I said, and I curled myself up in the parsimonious hay. But I was troubled, deep into my sleep, by the harsh unhappy certainty in his words. Could he possibly be right? Could it all have been a dream?

When I woke after my cold stiff slumber in the dusk of the morning I found that I was not going to be able to prove anything to Lars, even if I could find Fernhoe, for he had gone.

He must have waited till I was asleep. A line of his footprints in the snow led back in the direction of Plymouth.

I went the other way. But once you are lost on those moors you are thoroughly lost, and though I searched the whole of Christmas day I never found my landmarks, and at last had to turn back, thumb a lift along the main road, and abandon the thought of seeing my friends.

And all the time under this unhappiness the thought of Lars was like an extra knot of bewildered pain.

By the time I reached the ship the men were all assembled: we were due to sail at midnight. The only one not there was Lars; he turned up very late, without his duffelcoat and fiddle, and avoided meeting my eye.

It was a short, sad trip. Somehow I found—and I think he felt the same—that I could not bear to talk to Lars. He jumped ship at Marseilles and I made no push to get him back. One of the men told me later that he'd sold his fiddle to buy something for the girl and that then, having milked him dry, she'd walked off quite coolly and left him for someone else.

For months afterwards I felt as if I'd lost a son. Worse, the memory of Fernhoe was somehow twisted and saddened; I wasn't sure that even if I could find it, I could bear to go back. Deliberately I kept to other waters and steered clear of the Bristol Channel and Plymouth Sound.

Time went by. I wasn't getting any younger, and, what was worse, I was becoming seized up with arthritis and knew that one of these days I must make my last trip, say good-bye to the old *Katharina*, and step ashore for good. And who then would take me in, where would I settle?

It was at some devilish little port in the Mediterranean—I stayed where it was warm these days—that the British Consul asked me if I would take on a Distressed Seaman—not a British citizen, but his mother had been British and he was ill and the Consul was sorry for him.

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You have guessed who it was, of course.

I was shocked when I saw him. He had aged twenty years, he was gaunt, his bones stood out like the ribs of a wreck, his face was a haggard shell with a mat of beard. But his eyes were as blue as ever.

"What have you been doing with yourself?" I said.

"Seeing the world," he said, and coughed. "Collecting sailors' legends." He gave me a hint of a grin. I wanted to get his poor wasted carcass bedded down in a bunk but he wouldn't hear of it; said he would work his passage to wherever we were going. By chance I'd just been offered, and had just accepted, a consignment of tobacco for Bristol, knowing as I did so that by returning to a home port I was acknowledging this to be my last voyage.

Lars said Bristol would do well enough for him; he could pick up a Norwegian ship and make his way home. He was going back, he said, to try and find some of his father's family. Myself, I doubted if he would last the trip out; whenever he coughed it seemed as if he would shake all his ribs apart.

Up in the Bristol channel we struck a November gale; I've met dirtier weather many a time, but I was anxious to get the ship back to port in good fettle, and grieving because this was my last trip, besides being sick at heart about Lars. Wearing the ship through the midnight storm was almost more than I could tackle. Lars surprised me. He'd plainly learnt a thing or two on his trips about the world, and in spite of his cough he was as good in the storm as two men.

And then, stupidly, when the blow was almost over and the seas were dying down, I had to go and fall overboard like a green boy—tired out, I was, and stiff, and so I just let a slanting wave knock my feet from under me.

None of the men saw me go. It was dark, and they were all over on the other side, battening down a bit of deck cargo that threatened to break loose. I knew that with my stiffened joints I could never swim. Drowning's as good a death as any, I supposed . . . and then Lars was beside me, his beard washed to a point and his eyes gleaming in the dark.

"On your back," he said. "Take it easy, I've got you." His arm swung me over.

"Crazy boy—" I gasped. "Why didn't you tell one of the men—?"

"No time. Keep your breath for swimming."

I searched the dark in vain for the lights of a boat. The *Katharina* seemed to have disappeared completely. Very probably no one had yet noticed we were missing, and when they

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did, what faintest chance was there that they would find us?

"You shouldn't have done it, Lars."

"Save your breath for swimming," he said again. I could hear his, in his chest, rasping like a faulty pump. But still he managed to keep us moving through the water. I couldn't do much to help; my legs felt numb and stiff, no longer part of me.

Presently we began to hear breakers, and—unbelievably, miraculously—out of the cold winter dawn I saw for a second time those black cliffs that I had climbed so many years before.

"Fernhoe," I gasped. "Up those cliffs. Fernhoe and Coldharbour." I felt my arm scrape on a rock, and the combined force of a wave and of Lars pushing hoisted me on to it. I gripped a ledge and reached down to haul him up, but the same wave, retreating, tugged him back.

"I'm done, Paparuto," he whispered. "Can't make it." And he sank like a stone.

So here I am, sitting on the spray-washed rocks, waiting for the sun to rise. Shall I, with my numb, stiff, old-man's joints, be able to climb the cliff that was almost too much for me fifteen years ago? Or will the rising tide wash me off the rocks like a bundle of soaked straw?

Whatever happens, I'm not worrying about it very much. I've been thinking about Lars. Somehow I believe that I shall see him again, and that it will be soon. And whether it is in Fernhoe, where they hardly speak, or in Coldharbour, where they never speak at all, what does it matter?

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THE PAINT BOX

"Cobalt and umber and ultramarine,
Ivory black and emerald green—
What shall I paint to give pleasure to you?"
"Paint for me somebody utterly new."

"I have painted you tigers in crimson and white."
"The colours were good and you painted aright."
"I have painted the cook and a camel in blue
And a panther in purple." "You painted them true.

"Now mix me a colour that nobody knows,
And paint me a country where nobody goes.
And put in it people a little like you,
Watching a unicorn drinking the dew."

E. V. RIEU

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ESCAPE

" Don't let me be afraid," she whispered

BY BRIAN CLEEVE

THE wind fingered the shutters, seemed to knock. Beside me in the dark I could hear Isolde catch her breath, almost hear the beating of her heart.

I reached out my hand, touched her. She was lying rigid as stone. Almost as cold.

" Isolde," I whispered. " What is it? " Although I knew.

" I can hear someone," she breathed. " Someone trying to get in."

" Only the wind." I put my arms round her, tried to warm her. " There's nothing to be afraid of. Nothing."

" If only I could believe it," she whispered. " When you hold me close . . ."

The shutters creaked again. Somewhere in the three hundred year old inn a timber cracked sharply as the night chill touched its fibres. Isolde buried her face against my throat, sobbed with terror. I stroked her hair, pale as a swan's spread wing in the darkness.

" It's nothing," I soothed her, " nothing." Her heart against mine. Like a bird dying.

And I lay staring at the shadowed beams of the ceiling, thinking for the seventh night in succession that I would give everything I possessed in the world for just ten minutes alone in a quiet place with Lieutenant Mark Tarrant of the 12th Hussars and the Bloods' Club and Shepley Hall, Herefordshire. Just ten minutes. And then perhaps another five when he'd recovered.

It had been a mistake to bring Isolde here, to the Inn of the Golden River, high up in the French Pyrenees. Too quiet, too lonely, too old. Too like Shepley Hall.

But then, when I'd been arranging the honeymoon, I hadn't really known what Shepley Hall had been like. What Isolde's life there had been like. It was only in these last nights that I'd begun to understand.

Although even from the beginning, from the first time I saw her, I'd sensed that there was something wrong. At the Herons'

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party. A dozen or so men getting intense over a mixture of gin and politics. The usual ration of Chelsea girls with Bardot hair-styles. And two people looking as hopelessly out of place as if they were at a fancy dress ball in formal clothes.

I noticed the man first. Big, with a face like raw beef and little hot blue eyes. A thick, already heavy body cunningly disguised in a very expensive tweed suit. He could have been a young country squire up in town to buy a new pair of guns and see the shows. Not a bad type at all.

And I wondered for a moment why I felt a shiver of distaste for him. Until I noticed his mouth. The lips thin and small and yet bent into an exaggerated Cupid's bow. A little rosebud of a mouth in that great red expanse of face. Like a worm in a rosy apple.

And then I saw the girl. He was standing beside her chair, half masking her from the room, as if he was guarding her. I saw a great sweep of impossibly fair hair. A pale carved face that seemed in the shaded lighting almost transparent, like alabaster. Long legs with the feet drawn back to one side and the ankles crossed, exactly as the books of etiquette require.

And suddenly every other girl in the room looked like a grubby, sprawling doll. Except that they looked free, and this girl didn't.

Not free. That was it. The man was standing too close to her. Too much over her. And she was too tense, too rigid, as if she was praying under her breath that this would soon be over.

I found John Heron and asked him who she was.

"A nice girl," he said vaguely. "Isolde Stewart."

"And the gruesome Mameluke? Husband? Boyfriend?"

"Some kind of third cousin. Something military, I gather. I don't know why in the name of God she brought him. He looks as if he was holding up the roof."

"Take him away from her," I murmured, "and we'll see if it falls down. Show him your etchings."

"You haven't a chance," he said. But a few minutes later I saw him lead the redfaced man away almost by main force, and I'd drawn a stool beside her chair before anyone else could move in.

"Peter Chisholm," I said. And noticed that before she answered she glanced very swiftly over her shoulder towards the doorway through which John Heron and her escort had disappeared. Only when she saw that he was really gone, her tenseness relaxed a little, her mouth smiled.

"I'm Isolde Stewart," she said, a little breathlessly, a little huskily; and I knew that if any other girl should ever tell me

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that her name was Isolde I'd call her a liar to her face. Within five minutes we were friends. And within another five I knew how to reach her on the phone. I was just getting out my diary to write the details down when a sudden movement of her head stopped me short.

Her escort had come back. I looked up, getting slowly to my feet, and he looked into my eyes without any attempt at pleasantness at all.

"This—this is Peter Chisholm, Mark," Isolde said. Almost as if she were begging him for something. "Mr.—Mr. Chisholm —my cousin, Mark Tarrant."

"How do you do," he said. And then immediately, almost without a break between the words, "I think we should be moving, Isolde. We've been here long enough." She came to her feet instantly, and within what seemed a minute they were gone.

"You owe me a bottle of whisky," said John Heron at my elbow. "Ten such minutes I will not spend again. An ego like an armour-plated truck. I feel as if I'd been run over. Did you find out why she brought him along?"

"His father is her guardian."

"I didn't know," John said. "She's Mary's friend really. They met at some party. Keep me posted how you get on."

But within a few weeks the thing had gone beyond anything I'd discuss with John Heron. I loved her. And I thought she loved me. Only it was very difficult to tell what she was really feeling. Always that tension in her, like the strings of a violin. But sometimes, when we'd meet for a late lunch in Soho, or tea somewhere, she'd relax a little. Smile. Even laugh. Until it was time to go. Then the tension would come back.

"I'm supposed to be having my hair done," she'd say. Or it'd be buying gloves or a dress. And with that strange suddenness of hers, she'd be gone. I knew that she was unhappy, of course. But I couldn't understand why. And it was like prising pearls from oysters to get her to talk about herself. Books, yes. Music. Plays. Me. But almost never her own life. Except the first ten years of it. Then she lit like a star at night.

"We lived on the island," she said. In the Caribbean. Sugar and rum, and a sprawling Spanish house. Servants who believed in voodoo. Sunlight like a golden curtain all day long. And her parents coming back from Miami, or New York, or Paris, or Rio, in a swirl of presents and excitement, turning the island upside down with guests, and speedboat races, and parties that went on till dawn. It didn't sound quite the life for a child, but when she spoke of it her face glowed from within.

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"And then one time they didn't come back," she said, drawing her finger through a drop of spilt red wine. "It was a long time before I realised they were dead. In an air crash. I couldn't believe I'd never see them again, until—my guardian—my father's cousin—Major Tarrant—came to take me to England." She stopped, and when I tried to make her go on, she remembered the time and fled. All our meetings were like that. I was only to ring her at certain times when she would be by the phone. If anyone else answered I was to pretend I'd got a wrong number. And whenever we met there was the same air of secrecy. Until one day I rebelled.

I lay now in the dark, Isolde's sleeping head against my shoulder, thinking of that day, a quarter of my mind still listening to the wind and the shutters. And realised suddenly that there was a difference in the sounds. A soft scraping. Like a rat gnawing metal. Or a man with a knife trying to force a catch.

Very gently I slid my arm from beneath Isolde's head, eased my feet to the floor. Scrape of metal on metal. A long pause. I stole across the room, praying that a board wouldn't creak, feeling my way towards the faint bars of starlight coming between the slanting laths of the shutters. Flattened myself against the wall beside them. I heard the catch fall back. The leaf of the shutter farthest from me swung softly outwards. Wait for it. Wait till he's half in the room, and then the back of his neck . . .

The second leaf swung out, and I lifted the edge of my hand in the dark, looking for his shadow. Head . . . shoulders . . . one more second . . .

And Isolde screamed.

Piercing. As if the knife was at her throat. The man went back as if he'd been shot. I heard him drop, run. Before I could look, he was lost in the darkness. A bulk of shadow running. I turned, threw myself on my knees beside the bed, caught her to me.

"Oh God, oh God," she panted, "I thought you'd gone. I woke—and you were gone—and then—I saw— saw him climbing through the window—Mark— "

"Mark?" I whispered. Mark?

"I knew he was following us. I knew."

"Rubbish," I said. "It was just a burglar." Outside in the passage someone knocked on the door, asked what was the matter. I wrestled briefly in my mind, weighing up the effects on Isolde of questions, excitement.

"Nothing," I called. "Only a nightmare." They went away, grumbling.

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" I know it was Mark," she whispered. " He used to do that in the old days, to frighten me. When we were children. I know, I know it was him. Peter, I'm so afraid . . . "

It was a long time before I could soothe her to sleep again. Peter, I'm so afraid. She'd said exactly that the day I rebelled. Only I knew better now what she meant, what lay behind that pathetic whisper of fear. Years of the kind of torment that only one child can inflict on another, weaker child. In the seven days and nights since we were married I'd begun to learn a little of it, and to guess more. The child arriving from the West Indies, already brokenhearted, lonely, frightened of a world that had grown cold and dark and strange. And her cousin Mark making an endless game out of torturing her mind.

" I had a pet rabbit," she told me once. " And one day when he couldn't think of anything else to do, he made me watch while his tame ferret killed it. Held my wrists behind my back. And every time it was just going to end, he'd save the rabbit. For a little longer. I think it lasted nearly an hour. That must be eight years ago, but I still dream of it."

" And what did his father say? "

" He laughed. He said it'd teach me what life was like. Mark can't do anything wrong in his father's eyes. ' He was always saying that what he called Mark's ' teasing ' was just what I needed ' to bring me out of myself.' Teasing! Even at night sometimes I'd be afraid to go to sleep."

" And yet when we met first, I thought you were in love with Mark."

" If someone tortures you long enough, you grow almost to love them. I read that in a book somewhere, and it's true. You seem to depend on them. They're all that matters in the world. If they smile, if they leave you alone for a little, then the day is good. Until it gets that you don't want them to leave you alone. Without them you feel lost . . . "

But that day I rebelled I didn't know all that lay behind Isolde's strangeness. Only that I was tired of secrecy and hurried meetings and that I loved her, and was going to see her guardian to tell him so. That was when she said she was so afraid.

" Of what? " I laughed. " Aren't you twenty-one? What can he say? "

He said a great deal. A little bantam of a man, like a miniature older replica of his son. The same mouth and hot little eyes. Only his were bloodshot and there was an unhealthy tinge of lead under the ruddiness of his face. A white fiercely-bristling moustache. A cavalry major's bark that seemed a little too

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exaggerated to be quite true. "A damned fortune hunter!" he shouted, at the end of a detailed summary of my character.

"But you've told Isolde that her estate is a liability rather than an asset. What fortune am I supposed to be hunting?"

He shouted for his son at that, and Mark Tarrant came in, lounging against the wall by the door as if he was waiting to kick me on my way out. Only I didn't go.

"I'm not bandyin' words with your type," the Major snarled. "Damned wine-shipper's clerk. Get out. And if I see you sniffin' round my ward again, I'll have the police on you."

"Isolde's twenty-one," I said.

"And I'm lookin' after her estate an' interests till she's twenty-five. Open the door for him, Mark."

"I'm not a lawyer," I said, "but I've an idea that any guardianship of yours over Isolde personally, ended the day she was twenty-one. It'll be very easy to find out, of course."

I thought Mark was going to come for me, and that his father was going to have a fit. He gripped the desk with both hands as if he needed to hold himself up, and his face went purple, and then lead-grey.

"In fact," I went on gently, "I have an appointment with a very good Chancery lawyer on just that point for this afternoon. I thought if we ran into difficulties he might be able to help."

"Sit down," the Major whispered. "Mark, get me one of my pills." He swallowed it, and wiped his face with a big yellow handkerchief, decorated with brown foxheads. "Now, what's all this damned rubbish about lawyers?"

Which gave me the beginnings of a few answers. And inquiries in the City a little later gave me some more. Even with the current prices of sugar, and absentee management, Isolde's estate should have been paying a lot more than nothing, which was the figure her guardian had been giving her whenever she asked. But the final answers would be a lot more complicated to sort out. Major Tarrant had had eleven years to confuse the issue and cover his trail, and however frightened he was at the thought of lawyers, I judged that he'd fight like a rat when he was cornered. The first thing to do was to get Isolde out of his hands. And Mark's.

Even before I learnt just what he had done to her in childhood, and how he had got his grip on her mind, I realised that the grip was there. And a dozen times between that first meeting and the wedding, I felt that the Major was holding his son back from provoking an explosion. And whenever Isolde was alone with Mark she came back to me white and shaking, refusing to tell me why.

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It was only when the wedding, and the bleakly frightful reception, were over, and we were on our slow honeymoon journey through France, that she began to tell me. At night, mostly, in broken sentences; in sudden, still half-frightened bursts of joy at being free.

"They made me feel, somehow, that I'd never be free. That the only thing that could ever happen would be to marry Mark. I think if I hadn't met you that night, perhaps I would have married him—just to get peace. They made such scenes."

"Why did you bring him to the Herons'?"

"They hated me going out by myself, especially at night. They said something would happen to me. And it did! It did!" She laughed almost hysterically, buried her face against my chest. And behind the hysteria I knew that she was still afraid.

I had thought all that would go in a day or so. Instead it got worse. Almost as if she felt guilty at each day's happiness. As if to be afraid somehow eased the guilt. And always the thought of Mark.

"Whenever he looked at me, I felt I had to do what he wanted. Part of me stood back, hated him. And yet the other part wanted to go on its knees. Can you understand that, Peter? Am I mad?

"They used to make me think sometimes that I wasn't quite sane. 'You're lucky to have us to look after you,' they'd say, and grin at each other. And when I'd make mistakes, do something foolish, they'd look very grave, or else get savagely angry as if no one else ever made a mistake before. People do make mistakes, don't they, Peter? Everyone makes mistakes?"

"Yes," I said gently. "Everyone makes mistakes."

Perhaps the worst I'd made was in not taking Mark Tarrant down into some convenient cellar and breaking his neck. As far as I could see, nothing less than that was going to free Isolde from his influence. Could it have been Mark at the window? It was absurd, and yet . . .

I lay awake almost until dawn, holding Isolde close against me, trying not to think of the nights when she had lain awake. Alone. Afraid. A child in terror in the dark. And a loutish boy with a mouth like a cruel rosebud climbing through her window to frighten her. Pretending to be a murderer with a knife. A kidnapper with a sack. And when the pretence was over, the last drop of terror wrung out of her, sitting on the edge of her bed to watch her crying, his little rosebud mouth wet with pleasure. I fell asleep, and dreamt of that thin, curving mouth.

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It was bright day when I woke. Knife blades of sunlight through the shutters. A clink of glasses from the bar downstairs. The world as fresh and clean and ordinary as newmade bread. Even the burglar seemed unreal, a dream, a trick of shadows. We had coffee and rolls at a wine-stained wooden table, while the labourers in the bar looked at us covertly over the rims of their pernod glasses; collected a cold chicken and a bottle of wine, some bread and fruit; paid. We were on the road by ten.

"In a fortnight we should be on your precious island," I said. The wind whipping over the screen of the open car had flicked away the last of the night's darkness. Somewhere in the small village behind us a local ne'er-do-well had fancied some travellers' cheques and travellers' trinkets. And been unlucky. That was all. Now for the border; Spain and then Portugal. We were leaving the car in Lisbon for a month, flying out to Port of Spain. An island steamer from there. "I'll make you an offer for your rum, if it's any good." Major Tarrant's accusation about being a wine-shipper's clerk was accurate enough, except that I'm a partner, with my father.

"It will have to be a better offer than I've been getting," Isolde said. I hadn't told her what I suspected about her guardian yet. What was the point? And I might be wrong, although I doubted it very much.

We drove for an hour or more, the road climbing steadily, winding through empty valleys, over white mountain torrents, past an occasional stone farmhouse, a pocket of woodland. The air had sharpened.

"Why don't we stop here for lunch?" Isolde said. I eased the car to a halt.

"It's very early," I said.

"I know. But it's so beautiful I don't want to leave it behind." She pointed to a little shelf of grass jutting out from the side of the valley, a few hundred yards from the road. It was surrounded by thick woods, but a path crossed the fields towards it. "We could carry our lunch up there."

"You mean I could carry our lunch up there," I said, resignedly. "All right."

It was farther than it looked, and steeper, and the path was a fraud, leaving us to fight our way through the wood against thorns and interlacing branches. But it was worth it when we arrived. It was like a theatre box, with the Pyrenees for a backdrop to the stage. All that were missing were trolls and giants for actors. The enormous stage of the valley was as empty as Eden. Only the road below, and our little white car

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with the red splash of the seats. For a second, out of the corner of my eye, I thought I saw a car travelling down the road from the border, but when I looked it was gone, and it didn't reappear over the next rise. It must have turned off to a farm.

I opened the wine, and we drank to each other, and to the island, and the future, and the day, and ate the chicken and the fruit, and threw down crumbs of bread for a colony of ants to carry enthusiastically away, and lay back in a pleasant drowse of sunshine and content. The night in the Inn of the Golden River, the sounds, the shadow at the window, were a thousand years away.

"Happy?" I said. Isolde touched my cheek, and I rolled over to kiss the palm of her hand.

And saved my life. The thud of the bullet into the turf and the sound of the shot came almost together. A heavy calibre revolver shot. And for what seemed like seconds I froze, head lifted, the skin crawling on my back, waiting for the second bullet, my mind paralysed with shock and unbelief.

"Wh—" Isolde began, and I could move again, gripping her shoulders, almost throwing her to the edge of the little shelf of grass, scrambling after her.

The second shot came as we went down the slope, sprawling in a heap at the bottom, rolling into the bushes, among the trees. A third shot crashed in the still-echoing silence, and a leaf floated down, brushed its pale green blade against the darker green of Isolde's shirt, fell to the ground. I pulled her deeper into the wood, behind tree trunks, into the darkest shadows.

"Mark," she whispered.

"We must get to the car," I breathed. And thought of the half mile of open turf between the wood and the road. Where was he? The shots had come from the far side of the wood. That must have been his car that I'd seen. He'd gone on ahead of us this morning, watched us coming through field-glasses. Come back when we stopped.

I listened. The echoes had grown still. It was so quiet that I could hear the beating of my heart. The breath shuddering in Isolde's throat. Where was he? In front of us, sunlight fell in a gold curtain on the open shelf of grass. Beyond it, more trees. Somewhere among them? But the trees surrounded the shelf, a hundred yards deep; a thick horseshoe of woodland lying against the mountainside. He could be working his way round.

I strained my ears. A leaf rustled. A twig snapped. There? Or there? Trees surrounding us. Darkness. No way to move without making a noise, giving ourselves away. He needn't move at all. Just wait. Wait till we moved.

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Suppose we went back? Away from everywhere he could be? To the farthest side of the wood? Then ran? In my mind I could see us running. Along that narrow path. Half a mile. And Mark running behind us, with a gun. But in sight of the road? Would he dare? I tried to remember if a car had passed in the hour that we'd been there. None. The valley slept under the sun. Beside me, very slowly, Isolde folded down on to her knees, put her face into her hands.

"It's Mark," she whispered again. Hopelessly. As if it wasn't any good to run from Mark. And I knew that if we ran, if we got away, the fear would stay with her, worse even than before. In her mind. In her sleep. In the dark. Even if we proved that it was Mark. Closed him between stone walls. Still she'd lie in the dark and wait for him to come. Watch the window for a shadow. Listen. As I was listening now. My body suddenly cold. I knelt down, held Isolde against me, felt her shaking.

A bird flew up from the wood with a rattle of wings against dry leaves, and the breath blocked my throat. I felt Isolde stiffen in my arms, saw her face white as marble.

"Can you stand?" I whispered. "We've got to move." She shook her head slowly. As if all her life she had been waiting for this moment. To be killed here in the wood.

"It's no good," she said dully. "No good."

I stood up, pulled her to her feet, put my arm round her waist. She didn't resist. Didn't help. How many nights of fear, how much terror had been needed to do this to her?

I turned, started dragging her up the slope of the mountainside. Not really planning. Not even thinking. Except that we couldn't make it to the car. Then go away from the car. The way he wouldn't expect. The trees were thinner here. Rocks jutting between roots, out of the thin brown soil.

We were above the grass shelf. Above the green roof of the main body of the wood. Higher again. Only a few trees now. The rocks tangled. Leaning. The horseshoe of the wood spread out below us like a map, almost enclosing the small green apron of the grass shelf. I drew Isolde into the shelter of two rocks, lay beside her on the flat sloping surface of one of them. Her eyes were open, staring at the sky. I pressed a finger against her lips, looked down at the wood.

Nothing moved. A long way away the car stood white and small by the road. Belonging to a different world. I barely recognised what it was. I looked down again. And below me, twenty, thirty yards down the slope, Mark Tarrant stepped out of the wood on to the green grass.

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He was wearing workman's clothes. Blue denims. A black beret. A revolver hanging loosely from his right hand. He walked across the shelf. Stared down into the wood. "Come out," he said. "It's no good hiding. Come out, Isolde."

Beside me Isolde stirred, lifting her head. I put my hand over her mouth.

"It's no good, I say," his voice echoed. "I know where you are. Come out, Isolde. Come out to me."

I leaned sideways, put my lips against her ear. "Don't move," I whispered. "Don't make a sound. Don't try to look."

She caught my hand, looked at me, and for the first time since the shots her eyes were alive, seeing me.

"Don't leave me," she whispered. "Don't go down—don't. He'll kill you."

I pressed my hand to her mouth again, looked over the rock. He hadn't heard. Hadn't moved except to squat down, cradling the pistol in his lap. But would she keep quiet when I was gone? Very slowly I took my hand away. She lay staring at me, her eyes violet with fear. But was I imagining that it was a different kind of fear? For me? Not just blind terror.

"It'll be all right," I whispered stupidly. "Just stay still."

I edged away from her, watching her face, her mouth. She stared back at me. But her lips didn't move. Then I was round the edge of the rock, out of her sight. Now was the test. If she screamed, cried out after me, we would both be dead. I waited a long second, and another, my heart not seeming to beat.

Below, Tarrant's wide, heavy back bent forward. He thrust out his legs behind him, lay prone on the grass, rested the barrel of his revolver across his left forearm. I dropped five yards down the slope while he was moving. Another five as he hitched his great body forward. Fifteen yards to go.

"I'll give you ten seconds to come out, Isolde. Then I'm coming after you. Do you remember how we played hide-and-seek at Shepley? In the house? In the woods? You could never hide from me for long, could you, Isolde? And the longer you hid, the worse it was when I found you. Wasn't it, Isolde?"

I was down to the edge of the open ground, the little shelf of grass ten yards across. Would she stay quiet against his voice?

"One. Two. Three. Four." Dragging out the count of seconds. I imagined his mouth as he was counting, savouring the terror that Isolde would be feeling.

I gathered my feet under me. Ten yards. "Five. Six." When he reached eight. "Seven. Eight."

My knees took him in the small of the back and my right hand gripped his gun wrist, jerked it up and away. I saw the gun

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go in a black curve against the brightness of the sky. Slid my left arm round his throat, felt for his right shoulder with my left hand. And with that his body whipped, arched like a salmon, and I was cartwheeling through space, sky and woods and valley.

I hit the slope with my shoulders, felt my breath go out of me like a door slamming, saw him coming. I doubled up, knees against my chest, lashed out with my feet, and he went over me and down, hit a tree trunk, sagged on to all fours.

We both clambered to our feet in the same second, stood swaying. And out of the corner of my eye I saw Isolde running down the mountainside.

"Peter," she called, and Mark turned his head.

"Isolde," he shouted. "That gun—by your feet. Bring it to me." I saw her check, stop. Her face stiffen, lose its life. "Bring it here," said Mark. As confidently as a man speaks to a dog he has trained.

I saw her stoop, pick up the gun. Saw him hold out his hand. Saw his mouth curve. And jumped. I hit him as if hatred had turned my fist to stone. In the mouth. Felt it smash under my knuckles. It wouldn't smile that Cupid's shape again.

I ducked my head and his fist brushed my skull. Then we locked, fell on the ground. My left hand at the back of his neck. The heel of my right under his jaw. His body arched as it had before, but I was ready this time. Let him go so that he stood almost on his head. And as he went over I chopped the side of his neck with the edge of my hand.

He came down and lay quite still, his breath rattling, the whites of his eyes showing.

I knelt on all fours, getting my breath, clearing my eyes. And saw a movement. Isolde. Holding the gun in both hands. The muzzle lifting. Her face very white. Unconscious as a mask of stone. And for the length of a held breath I saw the black ring of the muzzle pointing at my heart. Wavering in a tiny circle. Her eyes blind. Her knuckle white on the trigger.

"Isolde," I breathed. Afraid to breathe.

"Peter," she said. As if she could hear me but not see me. A familiar voice whispering to her from the dark. Her knuckle whiter. Whiter. And then the muzzle swung. Away and down.

I lashed out and struck her hand as she fired.

But for that she would have blown Mark's face away. As it was, the bullet hit his shoulder. Like a blacksmith's hammer. It seemed an enormous length of time before he screamed. She let the gun fall from her hands, stared at him as if she was seeing him for the first time.

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" Have I killed him? " she whispered.

" No," I said.

She buried her face against my coat. Began to sob. Beside us, on the ground, Mark had stopped screaming, was trying to touch his ruined shoulder with his left hand.

" For God's sake," he begged. " For God's sake, help me."

I stared at him without answering. It was Isolde who moved.

" You'd better bandage him," she said. " I'll go for the police." She walked away without looking back. Pushed into the wood as if she was sleepwalking. Vanished. For a little while I could hear branches rustling. Then nothing for a long time. Then the car. I sat down to wait, while the torn rags of shirt reddened on his shoulder where I'd roughly bandaged it.

" I took your gun from you in the fight," I said after a while, " and shot you in self defence. If you say anything different to the police, I will kill you when you come out of prison. Do you understand? " He hesitated, and I bent over him.

" Yes," he said. " I understand."

I picked up the gun to put my fingerprints on it, and waited for Isolde to come. Wondering bleakly how she would come back. How her mind would be. If she would ever sleep again.

I think she went very close to going out of her mind. Even with my version of the story she had to be at the trial. And as the days dragged by, I saw her grow thinner, paler, further away. Until I wished with all my heart that I'd let her kill Mark Tarrant.

Her guardian was dragged into the trial too, of course. And was very lucky, I thought, not to stand in the dock beside his son, as an accessory before the fact. He had been robbing Isolde for years, as I'd guessed, and for Isolde and me to have been killed by an " unknown bandit " on a French mountain road would have solved his problems very neatly. Too neatly for it to be coincidence.

But Mark Tarrant swore it was a crime of passion, of jealousy; said that he'd known our route, as of course he had, gone mad at the thought of another man on a honeymoon with Isolde, followed us, and tried to kill us both. Perhaps he thought the French would be more sympathetic to such a motive. Perhaps he thought his father might still save something from the wreck, for when he came out of prison in four years' time. But Mark was wrong if that was what he hoped. The English police were waiting for Major Tarrant when he stepped off the plane. And that was another trial. And a sentence of three years for misappropriation and plain theft.

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It was six months after our honeymoon before we reached the Caribbean. And I still wasn't sure that the fears were gone from Isolde's mind. Not even when I held her in my arms, and she lay asleep. Because sometimes I would wake in the night, and she would be awake. And once she was whispering. The same words over and over again. "Oh God, don't let me be afraid. Oh God, don't let me be afraid."

After that she didn't whisper any more, because she knew I might hear. But still she lay awake, staring into the dark. I would hear her breathing, know that she was awake. Feel the shuddering of her body. And wonder how I could reach her. What could help her. Until one morning, very early, I woke and found she was gone from beside me. Not in the room. Not in the house.

I went on to the verandah, looked down towards the silver beach. The last of the moon sending its path across the dark sea. And a shadow wading into the path. Out into the sea. Hair like a cloud of palest gold in the moon.

I ran like a madman. Screamed. She turned. Lifted her hands. I thought she was going down; flung myself forward, clawed at the indifferent water with my hands.

"Peter," she said. "Peter." I reached her, held her, touched her hair, her eyes. "The dark," she whispered, holding my face between her hands, laughing, crying. "I'm not afraid of the dark any more. Can you understand? I used to swim like this before the sun came up. Alone. And I wasn't ever afraid. And now it's like that again. As if I'd never left the island. And you'd come here to find me."

She slid out of my arms, began to swim back to the shore. And after a little while I followed her. Behind the palm trees the sky was growing pale. Before I reached the shore it would be bright day.

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DIVIDED SENTIMENT

As every sub-editor knows, it is always dangerous to split one sentence into two headlines; the parts may acquire unintended meanings of their own. So with banners. We read of a demonstration lately. . . Banners were carried inscribed with slogans, among them, "We are fed up with the British Government." But it proved impossible to get the whole slogan on to one banner in large enough letters, so it was split. The first banner read, "We are fed"; the second, "Up with the British Government."

from The [*Manchester*] *Guardian*

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A weird short-short by "Bitter Bierce"—the famous American satirist who disappeared without trace in Mexico in 1913.

STALEY FLEMING'S HALLUCINATION

BY AMBROSE BIERCE

OF two men who were talking, one was a physician.

"I sent for you, Doctor," said the other, "but I don't think you can do me any good. Maybe you can recommend a specialist in psychopathy. I fancy I'm a bit loony."

"You look all right," the physician said.

"You shall judge—I have hallucinations. I wake every night and see in my room, intently watching me, a big black Newfoundland dog with a white forefoot."

"You say you wake; are you sure about that? Hallucinations are sometimes only dreams."

"Oh, I wake all right. Sometimes I lie still a long time, looking at the dog as earnestly as the dog looks at me—I always leave the light on. When I can't endure it any longer I sit up in bed—and nothing is there!"

"Mm—what is the beast's expression?"

"It seems to me sinister. Of course I know that, except in art, an animal's face in repose has always the same expression. But this is not a real animal. Newfoundland dogs are pretty mild-looking, you know; what's the matter with this one?"

"Really, my diagnosis would have no value: I am not going to treat the dog."

The physician laughed at his own pleasantry, but narrowly watched his patient from the corner of his eye. Presently he said, "Fleming, your description of the beast fits the dog of the late Atwell Barton."

Fleming half rose from his chair, sat again, and made a visible attempt at indifference. "I remember Barton," he said, "I believe he was—it was reported that—wasn't there something suspicious in his death?"

Looking squarely now into the eyes of his patient, the physician

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said, "Three years ago the body of your old enemy, Atwell Barton, was found in the woods near his home and yours. He had been stabbed to death. There have been no arrests; there was no clue. Some of us had theories. I had one. Have you?"

"I? Why, bless your soul, what could I know about it? You remember that I left for Europe almost immediately afterwards—a considerable time afterwards. In the few weeks since my return you could not expect me to construct a theory. In fact, I have not given the matter a thought. What about his dog?"

"It was first to find the body. It died of starvation on his grave."

We do not know the inexorable law underlying coincidences. Staley Fleming did not, or he would perhaps not have sprung to his feet as the night wind brought in through the open window the long wailing howl of a distant dog. He strode several times across the room in the steadfast gaze of the physician; then, abruptly confronting him, almost shouted, "What has all this to do with my trouble, Dr. Halderman? You forget why you were sent for."

Rising, the physician laid his hand upon his patient's arm and said, gently, "Pardon me. I cannot diagnose your disorder offhand—tomorrow, perhaps. Please go to bed, leaving your door unlocked; I will pass the night here with your books. Can you call me without rising?"

"Yes, there is an electric bell."

"Good. If anything disturbs you push the button without sitting up. Good night."

Comfortably installed in an armchair, the man of medicine stared into the glowing coals and thought deeply and long, but apparently to little purpose, for he frequently rose and, opening a door leading to the staircase, listened intently; then resumed his seat.

Presently, however, he fell asleep, and when he woke it was past midnight. He stirred the failing fire, lifted a book from the table at his side and looked at the title. It was Denneker's *Meditations*. He opened it at random and began to read:

"Forasmuch as it is ordained of God that all flesh hath spirit and thereby taketh on spiritual powers, so, also, the spirit hath powers of the flesh, even when it is gone out of the flesh and liveth as a thing apart, as many a violence performed by wraith and lemure sheweth. And there be those who say that man is not single in this, but the beasts have the like evil inducement, and—"

The reading was interrupted by a shaking of the house, as by the fall of a heavy object. The reader flung down the book,

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rushed from the room, and mounted the stairs to Fleming's bedchamber. He tried the door, but contrary to his instructions it was locked. He set his shoulder against it with such force that it gave way. On the floor near the disordered bed, in his night clothes, lay Fleming gasping away his life . . .

The physician raised the dying man's head from the floor and observed a wound in the throat. "I should have thought of this," he said, believing it suicide.

When the man was dead an examination disclosed the unmistakable marks of an animal's fangs deeply sunken into the jugular vein.

But there was no animal.

LEISURE PLEASURE 2

A rhyming quiz—for new addicts, each clue leads to two words, each of two syllables, which rhyme in both their syllables. i.e., "Mention pension" qualifies, but not "Mention truncheon." Some of the clues are slightly contrived, but not unrecognisably so. An example of clue and answer:
Cricketer's fastenings—Hutton's buttons (or Grace's braces).
Answers next month.

1. *Cows fight*
2. *Desperate remedy*
3. *Scrounge breakfast food*
4. *Bicycling trophy*
5. *Nursery egghead*
6. *Admission to Lords*
7. *Dangerous spirit*
8. *Story telling*
9. *Meek complaint*
10. *Frail ninepin*
11. *Gloomier shade*
12. *Odd fivers*
13. *Charming gift*
14. *One sensation*
15. *Dried fruit bowl*
16. *Economical instrument*
17. *Less happy reptile*
18. *Uncomfortable mount*
19. *Hot record*
20. *Bloodthirsty account*

SOLUTION to LEISURE PLEASURE in September ARGOSY

1. *Double stubble*
2. *Handy brandy*
3. *Deafer heifer*
4. *Tacky baccy*
5. *Brigitte's digits*
6. *Fertile turtle*
7. *Cherry beret*
8. *Simple dimple*
9. *Floppy poppy*
10. *Plaster faster*
11. *Proper copper*
12. *Greener gleaner* (*or Cheaper reaper*)
13. *Shorter daughter* (*or Smaller crawler*)
14. *Crikey! Psyche*
15. *Higher brier*
16. *Longer conger*
17. *Table fable*
18. *Lurchin' urchin* (*or Tipsy gipsy*)
19. *Yellow fellow*
20. *Tarnish varnish*

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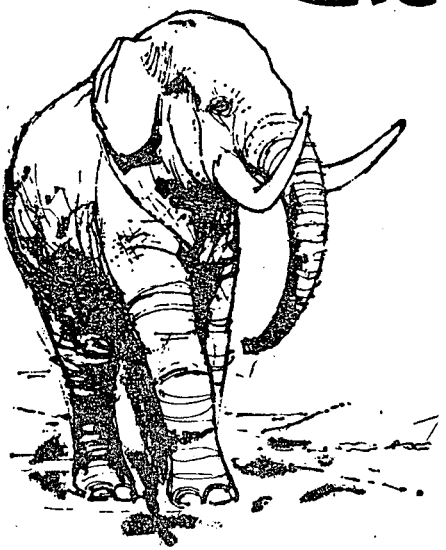
No Other Elephant



By GERALD SPARROW

The author at the Court of Siam—and final adventures

I HIRED a large and very comfortable taxi to take me to the Grand Palace by nine o'clock in the evening. Tok, my manservant, sat with the chauffeur which gave a misleadingly rich aspect to my arrival—the judge with two retainers on the job.

The Palace Guards, in their copies of British nineteenth-century Guards uniform, saluted. We drove in and, ushered from one official to another, I eventually took my place with the other officials of the Ministry of Justice on the right of the great human square that was forming in the golden domed hall with its gigantic venetian mirrors and Italian marble columns.

The Lord of Life was a little late tonight . . .

Suddenly the doors at the end of the hall were opened, suddenly and silently, and there was the King. He wore a mauve panung tonight and was followed, at a discreet distance, by his Queen, a smiling, gracious little woman dressed in gold, gold *prasin* and gold blouse, with a single Order in diamonds that glinted gaily in the light of the chandeliers.

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The King walked round the square and here and there he chatted to a Minister or friend. The courtiers did not kneel tonight. This was being done in the modern manner. They *wei*'d deeply as the King passed them. That was all. The King even shook hands with one or two Ambassadors, including the American and British Ambassadors—and the stiff black little figure of the representative of His Imperial Majesty of Japan, accompanied by his flower-like kimonoed wife.

The inspection was over; the civilians on the right, the armed services on the left followed King Prachadipok into the supper-room. The King was followed by his uncle, the Prince Nakorn Sawan, a burly autocrat said to the most powerful figure in the kingdom, but not the most popular.

Behind this formidable figure followed the young Siamese princes, led by the Chow Fas and the Pra Ong Chows—the sons of heaven—the Mom Chow princes, the grandsons of a king, bringing up the rear. As gay and assured a gathering of young men it would be impossible now to meet. No one had ever said no to them. If they had money difficulties, the kindly King would—reluctantly—help them, with a mild scolding. All the prettiest girls competed for their favours, whether they were married or not.

I watched them now as they followed their King, chattering and laughing, the little Lords of Life, and the thought came to me: Shall I ever see such people again, or is their golden world about to crash? Perhaps those sly, persistent rumours that had eddied and flowed round the market of Chiengmai prompted my thoughts. I dismissed the idea. The King was on his throne and the people, one and all, acclaimed him.

He sat that night with his Queen Ramphai on a raised dais for all to see. With him were his uncle, the Prince Bidyalongkorn, Prince Dhami, and one or two of his closest friends. Over the dais fairy lights in gold, rose, and purple were lit so that, after the champagne had started to do its work, it was very easy to imagine that here was indeed a divinity come to earth, a Prince of Heaven visiting mortals in the golden city, the abode of the gods.

The King withdrew behind the golden curtains soon after eleven. He was a frugal, abstemious man by nature and because, like so many of the descendants of King Chulalongkorn, his health was not too good. As long as the King was there the chatter at the supper-tables had been decorous, the manners perfect. But when majesty departed everyone relaxed a little, and drank the limitless champagne more freely.

After midnight, under a waning moon, we all drove home. We were happy. Good wine, good food, a kindly King had left their magic of wellbeing on us. But two facts we did not know. We did not know the reason why the punctual Prachadipok had been late that night, and we did not know what was going on in a little back room of a house on stilts by the river in the old capital of Ayuthia forty miles upriver from Bangkok.

The King had been delayed because the Prince Nakorn Sawan

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had been annoyed by a disturbing report he had had from his Chief of Police. The secret police, those who were supposed to be the ears and eyes of the King, had submitted a report to their chief, who had thought it sufficiently important and urgent to waylay the Minister and, he hoped, the King, before they entered the audience hall. This he had done.

The paper which, with profound apology, he handed to Prince Nakorn Sawan had been brief and pointed. It was feared that certain disloyal subjects of His Majesty were plotting a coup d'état.

The Prince thought it sufficiently urgent to show the memorandum to the King. There were the names of the plotters, young men all, foreign educated—Nai Pridi Panomyong, an official in the Ministry of Justice, Phya Bahol, a colonel in the Ministry of Defence, Major Pibul Songram, a young officer said to have considerable influence in the cadet school.

The King said, "Take what steps you think necessary."

In reply to an entreaty from the police chief that he be empowered to arrest all the conspirators that night, Prince Nakorn Sawan said, "I will consider the matter in the morning." But in the morning the King left for Hua Hin, the business unattended to.

The following day, June 24, at dawn, the conspirators struck.

When I was in Bangkok it was my habit to play round the short Dusit Palace golf-course, which was near the Grand Palace, early in the morning, starting off before six. This landed me in the middle of the first Siamese revolution. For in that back room in the house at Ayuthia the conspirators had successfully hidden out, hourly expecting and dreading arrest, for they knew the smell of treason was heavy in the hot air of the Siamese summer.

The arrest never came. The Prince had not authorised the arrests. The police chief was powerless to act without the authority of the Minister. During the night of the 23rd the conspirators slipped into Bangkok. At four a.m. the armoured cars were out in the streets. All the princes still in Bangkok were under arrest in that same gilded hall where the loaded trays of the evening had not yet been cleared away and the empty bottles of champagne stood like little black sentinels round the littered supper-tables.

The King, warned, could easily have escaped to Malaya. But he had no such thought. He may not have been the cleverest of kings—he had no favourites on whom he lavished public money who would tell him all. But he was brave, and he had nothing to be ashamed of, and much of which to be proud.

He had introduced slowly but surely a modern image into the Siamese theme and meticulously for years he had answered the petitions of his people. As soon as his relatives were released—Prince Nakorn Sawan was banished to Java—the King signed a provisional constitution that made the monarchy a constitutional one, without real power. There was to be an elected chamber, elections, voting, freedom, democracy. High hopes were held, but for so short a time. It had been too easy for a few army officers to seize control of the golden mile.

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All the arms in Siam had been collected in the armoury in Bangkok and were in the hands of the rebel Government. The signature of the Director-General had been forged—he, too, was away at Hua Hin. All local garrisons and police saw no reason to doubt an order to send their weapons to Bangkok " for renumbering and replacement." So a provincial counter-revolt was ruled out.

Three days later I travelled back to my post in Chiengmai, the faithful Tok with me. At first it seemed that nothing, really, had changed, but in fact it had. The whole social climate had been altered for good. Men no longer feared the ultimate wrath of the King of the golden parol. Discipline was relaxed. The words "*mai dai*"—" it cannot be done "—found currency in ordinary Siamese speech, even that of inferiors talking to their superiors. The whole intricate fabric of the Siamese ranks, the Luangs, the Phras, the Phyas, and the Chow Phyas, vanished overnight. Titles, except for the royal family, were abolished.

It was to be a brave new world. But in the event, it was the beginning of military dictatorship. The army chiefs took the King's place, but the army chiefs had not always the King's prestige nor the King's training.

As I stepped out of the train at Chiengmai I suddenly remembered my friend, Henry Paget. The tempestuous events of the revolution had swept him and his danger from my mind. I was still carrying with me the image of those armoured cars that had cruised so menacingly round the Palace district of Bangkok as I finished my round of golf. I had felt the outrage of their threat, a threat never made before in the hundred and fifty years of Siam under the House of Chakri. Could it be that I had left one violence to witness another? And was this to be not a threat, but the carefully calculated murder of my friend?

I had plenty to think about as I dined alone that evening waited on by Tok, who not by a sign or a gesture revealed what effect the events had had on him, one of the people of Siam. With a troubled spirit I slept restlessly, fitfully, until the dawn.

The impact of the revolution had a delayed action. The more one examined what had happened the more far-reaching its effects appeared to be even for foreigners in Siam, in some respects especially for foreigners.

It did not, of course, affect them socially as it did the Siamese; the fabric of their clubs, their games, their parties, and their lives was unchanged. It struck deeply at their jobs.

Both Henry, as a teak forest manager, and I, as Judge of the International Court at Bangkok, would be vitally affected. No revolutionary nationalist Government would renew all the teak forest leases to foreigners even if the foreigners nurtured the industry as no local firm would ever do. My job of course was doomed, not immediately perhaps, but in the long run. There was no greater slur on a nation's independence than extraterritoriality.

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These were my thoughts at breakfast the morning after my return. Meantime news arrived constantly by telephone from Bangkok. The revolutionary Government had issued a number of decrees in the form of an address to the people. A revolutionary committee would elect the new Ratramontri—the Ministers—instead of the old Senabodie, the King's advisers.

How, I wondered, would all this affect the princes of the north? Would they escape the net? Would they be more lawless or would their wings be clipped? Would the opium empire be stamped out or would it flourish? I thought of Henry Paget's rash telegram reporting illegal poppy growing to the Chief of Police. Would corruption cease or would it take on dimensions hitherto undreamt of?

Tok came round and I drove to the court. The little children at the gate by the temple sank to their knees. Perhaps the glad tidings of the equality of man had not reached them—yet.

Tok turned over the New Bridge towards the court and, as we did so, a terrible sight startled me. From each terminal of the bridge, a high steel structure, some portions of a human body had been stuck for all to see. Already a swarm of flies buzzed around the dripping human meat; and perched on the bridge rail, hopping nervously, greedily, were a flock of vultures trying to summon up courage to swoop on the rotting meat and devour it.

I cried out in anger and terror, but Tok said, " Maybe a criminal, Nai. The old custom. Better say nothing."

I told him to drive past the court into the market because I wished to leave a list of groceries with Swee Hong, the Chinese grocer. And I was glad I did so, for on a lamp-post in the centre of the market I saw the decapitated head of the man whose limbs had decorated the bridge. On the head, unmistakable, though bloody, was the cap of a junior police officer.

As I gazed bewildered at this awful sight a sergeant of police and three men marched up to the spot. They took down the head of the young man whom I now saw had been handsome and in death had had his features contorted in agony. They wrapped the head in a white cloth and marched off with it to the market police post.

Sickened and apprehensive I joined the judges in the court. For some reason I had at once connected the quartering of the police officer and the public presentation of this corpse with the revolution; but when I assumed this when talking to Phya Indra, the chief judge, he said that the death of the policeman had nothing to do with events in Bangkok.

" It was an opium matter, Mr. Sparrow. This young man, a Captain of Police, was sent up from Bangkok with two superior officers to investigate reports of widespread poppy growing and opium preparation in the north of which the railway rest-house here is said to be the focal distributing point.

" He was an intelligent young officer of good family educated in Switzerland. He was in fact our first Siamese handwriting expert and had set up a fingerprint department under the direction of the

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Director-General of Police. His name was Sanoh, Captain Sanoh. He should have known from past experience that his mission was a dangerous one. Only last month a Eurasian benzine dealer was shot dead in front of his shop. He had, it was said, broken one of the unwritten laws of the opium empire. But Captain Sanoh ignored the danger. Last night, very unwisely, he went alone to a house in the market, the House of Virgins. Do you know it?"

"No, I don't know it, but it has a charming name."

Phya Indra smiled. "Yes, and even justified to some extent, from what one hears. The proprietor, a Nang Vichien, is very well known and all the prettiest young girls of the north who belong to desperately poor or greedy parents are apt to be offered there. Well, as I was saying, Captain Sanoh went there for two or three hours. The police have special privileges, naturally, at all these places. They have the power to close them, you see, without a court order. The captain was given free Lao Rong, the local spirit, and a girl to amuse him.

"Early in the morning he left to return to the Government rest-house where he and his senior officers were billeted. He was alone, apparently, as he walked through the night. But only apparently, for following him silently, and creeping nearer to him all the time, was one of the opium syndicate's hired assassins. In the gloom of the bridge the shadow caught up with the captain and drove a knife into his back so expertly that it penetrated the heart without drawing any blood.

"That is all we know."

"But this gruesome exhibition of the body. Who did that?"

"We do not know. It was all part of a planned operation, no doubt. It is intended to be a warning, it *is* a warning to all those who would interfere in opium matters."

"What happened to the man's stomach?"

"It was entwined over the fence surrounding the market police station. I think these people dislike the police, or at least those police who are not corrupt and do not join in the opium traffic either as receivers, informers, or straight dealers."

It was an appalling crime and showed how powerful and daring the thugs of the opium syndicate had become.

I had a long talk that morning as the three young judges and Chow Rart mounted the Bench with the chief judge, who was openly delighted with the turn of events in Bangkok, very much the exception in his age group and position.

Phyra Indra knew a lot of what was going on.

"Will they ever arrest the people who killed Sanoh?"

Phya Indra was not, I think, glad I asked this question. He looked older and grave. "I doubt it. I very much doubt it, unless the army were to take over opium suppression—but the temptations are so great . . . By the way, I have a telegram for you. It came yesterday forwarded with some official wires. It's from Muang Sutep."

I tore open the buff envelope. It was from Henry. It was no

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urgent call for help, and yet it seemed to contain a plea. It said, " Hope you can visit us here soon. Henry and Wanta."

" Your friends are well? "

" Oh yes. They want to see me."

" Well, that should be possible. Our lists are up to date. You can always slip away for ten days or so . . ."

In fact I could not leave for over a month, by which time I was able to fix the dates for cases in my file so that I was free to go to see Henry and Wanta, his lovely Siamese princess.

I had the services of Nai Rut again, the cheerful Burmese-Siamese of the Forest Department. He had made friends with Tok, my servant, who, as it happened, was half Malay, and the two men made a very happy combination looking after their master in small ways as well as in the essential business of keeping us on the paths that led to Muang Sutep.

It is odd that, often, a journey made the second time seems much shorter, and so it was on this occasion. It actually took us less time, too. We cut two days off the march.

I could not help feeling excited as we approached Henry's bungalow. The secrecy with which he had abducted Wanta had surprised and, I suppose, offended me. But I had long since forgiven him. After all, if stealing the ruling Prince's niece was your plan, the fewer people who knew about it the better.

I felt sure that Henry's motive had not been secretiveness but a determination not to involve me. After all, I was a judge in Chiengmai; if I had been a party to this, the Chow Luang might have felt justified in asking the Minister of Justice to give me an appointment elsewhere. Or I might well have been in danger from direct action by " the family " in Chiengmai.

I was not only excited. I was curious. Henry had not, as far as I knew, married Wanta either at the British Consulate or at the Siamese Marriage Registry. Yet would they not, living as man and wife, be married by Lao custom in the ways of the Siamese people?

I now knew enough of local custom to know that they would. Their union was as sacred and enduring, locally, as if they had been married in Westminster Abbey. They were married in the eyes of Buddha. That was all that really mattered. The registration was a formality—a modern red-tape requirement—that could be complied with any time. Especially if they had a son.

They both greeted me with great warmth, Henry running down the path to meet me, and Wanta, dressed in a white silk blouse and riding habit, kissing me on both cheeks in European fashion, a most un-Siamese gesture.

Certainly Henry's bungalow looked quite different. Wanta had covered the wicker chairs with chintz, put up rose-coloured curtains, put down some lovely rugs made in Burma. Flowers were everywhere and the house was as clean and as polished as a new toy. It really seemed as if Wanta and Henry had defied the Chow Luang and convention with success. It was a delight to see them together.

Wanta had changed. She was still a Siamese at heart. I had

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no doubt that every night in bed she knelt, her hands raised in prayer, her fingers apart, supplicating the Buddha to protect and help her and the man she loved, and to bless and cherish their union so that they should be fruitful and last for ever.

But in her manners at any rate she had become an English girl of the upper classes, to which she had added a little Siamese witchery to taste.

She spoke English now, the kind of English Henry spoke, and sometimes she mocked him lovingly. "One does not do that, does one, darling, or does one?"

Henry was obviously very much in love with Wanta, and I could not help thinking that she adored him. If this affair were to break up there would, I knew, be broken hearts. They walked together, these two, in a golden dream.

But there was more to it than that. They seemed so well suited. They laughed together. So close were they that the thought of their ever being parted seemed an outrage. The situation had such explosive possibilities that I found myself praying that this affair might endure in spite of the forces arrayed against it.

On a night such as this, who would see the fleeting furtive figure in the bushes? But we should hear the shot . . .

It was not a shot we heard but something much more terrifying, the wild trumpeting of an elephant that appeared to be in great pain—or mad.

I ran down to the gully where the Siam Merchants' beasts were tethered. There was a clearing here, and what we saw froze us with its horror. An elephant, apparently mad, was raging round the gully. He caught the mahout of one of the tethered elephants in his trunk, flung him into the air, then trod on him with a ghastly savagery. The man screamed and was still.

The maddened elephant made straight up the gully towards Henry and his headman. I thought, "There is no saving them." They did not run, but stood their ground like men transfixed. The charging beast was within ten yards of his quarry when the air was shaken by a trumpeting that rose to the crescendo of a roar. I knew even then what that was. The mighty elephant, Pra Chorn, angered by the mad intruder, had broken his tether and was going in to kill.

I saw his great shape crash out of the darkness and his two tusks, agleam in the light of a naphtha flare that one of the mahouts had lighted, sink deep into the belly of the demented elephant. In a minute the two beasts had wrenched themselves free. Pra Chorn stood there untouched, the mad beast gored and spurting blood.

Then Pra Chorn, like some great avenging prehistoric monster, charged again. This time the invader turned and fled, leaving a red path in the jungle. Pra Chorn followed to the end of the gully, then silently returned and surrendered to Henry. It was a scene that took no more than seconds, but its savage impact was grotesque and sickening.

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Wanta ran to cling to Henry, sobbing. Henry spoke to his headman. I asked them what had happened. Henry turned to the headman again. I now knew enough Siamese to translate his reply.

A mad elephant—a beast on *musth*—had been driven into the gully at the exact moment of Henry's inspection. "They meant it to kill you, Nai. But for Pra Chorn it would have done so."

We made to return to the bungalow, but Henry turned back. We did not need to ask him what he was going to do. He was going to speak to Pra Chorn, to thank him for saving his life. It was nearly an hour later that he came in, white and weary.

High in the corner of the sitting-room was a Buddha in gold sitting on a lotus. Before she went to bed, Wanta placed some yellow flowers in a vase. Standing on a chair, she placed these by the Buddha. Then she sank on to her knees and three times raised her hands in supplication and gratitude. Not a word was said—but the smiling god who looks after his own seemed to understand. It was peace again.

But would Siam Merchants allow this union to go on for ever, and, if it did, would it not mean that promotion would be blocked to Henry? At this stage it never occurred to me that Henry might want to marry an English girl. He seemed to have put that aside.

On my first evening, as Henry was making his rounds of the elephants after dinner, Wanta came quietly into the sitting-room. "I want to talk to you, Nai," she said. She still addressed me as Nai. Was it because I sat on the Bench? I wondered.

She was dressed in Thai clothes now, a rose-coloured sarong from Lampoon and a loose silk blouse. She curled herself up on the sofa beside me, hiding her bare feet under her sarong.

She lit a cigarette, and then said, "He is in danger, Nai. He has had warnings but has tried to hide them from me. Chow Kavalongse has warned him to leave, but he has no thought to do so. If anything happened to him, I, too, would die. Speak to him, Nai. Tell him to take care."

I promised to do that. But when I mentioned the matter to Henry next day, he waved it aside. "Of course they don't want me here in the middle of their territory. Especially after the police visit. But this is my job, isn't it?"

"You could get a transfer?"

"I could, old boy, but I won't. Why should I run away?"

And that was that, but as I undressed that night in my room next to the room of Henry and Wanta, again and again the threat of Kavalongse came back to me.

We had dined late that evening in the comfort and even luxury that Henry and Wanta contrived to secure even in Muang Sutep. We were waited on by a very efficient Siamese servant helped by a Kamu boy. The Kamu are a forest people, hardworking and obedient but curiously lacking in pride. At this time if a Kamu did anything wrong and was blamed, his answer invariably was "I am only a Kamu, Nai. You cannot expect too much of me."

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These two men, dressed in faultless white jackets and blue sarongs, served dinner that had been cooked by Wanta's Chinese cook. It was her birthday and Henry opened two bottles of a good champagne—at seven-and-six a bottle not too extravagant a gesture. But a very nice one.

All this and the toasts to Wanta delayed Henry's last elephant inspection from seven to nearly ten. Wanta asked him not to go. "Leave it to the headman, darling."

But Henry took a torch and said, "Fifteen minutes, no more."

Wanta and I returned to the lighted verandah to enjoy our coffee. The night was a silent one with very little moon.

Henry, I know, expected to pick up the trail of the mad elephant and to follow the red ribbon of its blood to those who had sent it. But Pra Chorn had killed his adversary. Half a mile from Henry's headquarters they found it, dead from madness and loss of blood. Dying, it had stolen into a cave by the track side and its shrunken grey bulk, the same colour as the stone, filled the cavity with an odd, grotesque camouflage.

Under Henry's orders six Kamus cut up the body and laid the dripping meat in the sun. The vultures were not long in coming. Henry had the tusks set in silver as a trophy.

I stayed on with Henry and Wanta for another week. And I realised that they had grown into each other.

They rose very early in the morning and Wanta joined Henry in all his work, riding with him on the ponies, Three Socks or Two Socks, to wherever Siam Merchants were operating. She rode with him, shot with him, and, together, they lived and laughed. In the evening, however, Wanta changed her personality. She was no longer the good companion. She was the mistress or the wife.

She bathed and changed into her *prasins* of gold, rose, or canary with her white lace blouses, and she was made ready for the love-making that was to follow. The servants called her "Mem," short for Memsahib, not "Mom" as they would have done had they regarded her as a Siamese princess. In their eyes and in the eyes of all who came to Muang Sutep she was "Nai's wife."

I hated to return. I felt that if I was with them in some way Henry and Wanta were safe. It was an absurd idea but I felt it with a compulsive certainty. But I had to go and they stood there, hand in hand in the morning sun on their verandah, waving to me.

It was not until the following summer that Henry took his first leave in Britain. He came into Chiengmai alone. Wanta, he said, preferred to stay and look after their home, rather than incur the wrath of her relatives in Chiengmai.

"It is brave of her, Henry."

"She is a brave woman," he said. "Fear is not in her code."

I am sure Wanta never had a code, except her pride as a Siamese princess. Her courage came from her love and its roots were those that move all women towards the man they love. But I said nothing more. Together Henry and I enjoyed the delights of Bangkok for three days. I had made my yearly pilgrimage

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coincide with the three days that he had to wait for his plane.

We visited the Golden Slipper, and La Roulette, and Lew's Number Two, the Bangkok nightspots, and walked back at dawn, or sped back in a sam law, the tricycle that carries a chair and is pedalled at furious speed by its owner or driver.

The social climate of Bangkok was almost unchanged for Europeans though the number of Japanese had increased.

There had been elections, of course, and Nai Pridi Panomyong, the young revolutionary, half Chinese, half Thai, with his smooth yellow face, large eyes, and hair en brosse, was a power in the land.

Eventually King Prachadipok went to the United States for an eye operation. I found that, before leaving, he had made me a Knight Commander of the Order of the Crown of Thailand. I looked at the diamond-studded Star and felt that this was something I should always remember.

Then the King went to Britain where, with his Queen, he settled at Virginia Water. He gave a charming little garden to Eton, his old school. In England he died, and only now are the Siamese people beginning to realise how good and honest and enlightened he was.

The young King Ananda took his place.

I saw Henry off. As we stood by the steam launch that was to take him out to the aircraft moored in midstream, I asked if he had any plans. He looked at me, his green eyes alight with amusement. "No plans, Gerald. Whatever will be, will be."

I found this curiously irritating. I am a lawyer and like to have the future cut and dried, as far as that is possible. But I was sorry, more than sorry, to see him go. "Have a good leave." He smiled and waved. Ten minutes later the heavy, cumbersome craft lifted itself reluctantly from the water and, turning west, flew into the setting sun.

I returned to Chiengmai, immersed myself in the routine of court work, passed through the looking-glass into the never-never world of the north, but was brought back to reality with a jolt when I received an airmail letter from Henry. The contents were not at all what I expected. I read the letter carefully again.

To cut a long story short, I have become engaged. Ruth Harris is her name. She is wonderful, Gerald, twenty-six, tall, graceful, very dark with a luminous beauty I find hard to describe.

Henry, however, did his best to describe Ruth and very attractive he made her sound. Then he continued:

I have had two thousand pounds—approximately twenty thousand ticals—credited to a number two account at my bank in Bangkok. This money is for Wanta "in settlement," as you lawyers say. I want her to return to her uncle's house and forget me.

I want you to arrange this. It will not be easy, but she always liked you; no one else has a chance. Ruth and I come out next month. A fortnight in Bangkok, then my old post.

So there it was. He had fallen in love again.

(Continued on page 74)

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I wired to Wanta inviting her to meet me in Chiengmai, saying that Henry was well, and that I had heard from him. She replied that she would come in ten days' time for a week and looked forward to meeting me.

I had a most unhappy, apprehensive ten days; when at last I saw her being driven in a rickshaw up my drive, I dived for the whisky decanter to have a stiff drink before she came in. In a moment she was with me. She was dressed in a summer dress of Lampoon cotton, beautifully cut. She wore a golden " wedding " ring, and she had had her hair cut short. She looked more like a European wife than a Siamese mistress and this upset me.

" You have heard the news—about me, I mean? "

" I've heard from Henry but not about you."

" I'm going to have a baby. A son, I hope. I think Henry will be the happiest man in the world."

I had a moment of absolute panic and this may have caused me to go on more quickly than I had intended.

" Wanta, I've heard from Henry. He's engaged to an English girl. They're coming out here. He asked me to tell you."

I thought she was going to faint. She went white, then red, and she dug her long red nails into her palms. Her breath came in spasms. " My God! How could he? "

I talked to her for nearly two hours. I gave her a draft for the money. At first I thought she was going to throw it at me, then she said, " I will keep it untouched for my son."

Finally she burst into a torrent of weeping so anguished and convulsive I thought she would never stop. She left me, making no promises, but I understood that in a few days she would be back with her uncle. I wired Henry that I had done what he asked me to do. He wired back saying he was grateful. He was getting married within a fortnight, he said.

I was in Bangkok when the ship arrived in port. At least, I thought, I will have time to brief Henry on the situation before he goes north. And I was frankly curious to meet Ruth.

Tok drove me to the old Danish East Asiatic Company wharf. Almost as I turned through the gates, the white ten-thousand-ton Diesel ship, spotless and sparkling in the morning sun, edged her way alongside. Ropes were thrown and caught. She was heaved to, and the gangways were lowered. I jumped out of the Essex and saw Henry and his bride standing on the upper deck, waving.

Henry said, " This is Ruth, Gerald." And from the pride and excitement of his voice I knew that this woman had changed Henry's life. She was as beautiful as Henry had suggested, but her attraction was of the kind that only her physical impact could convey. Her complexion was olive and her hair blue-black. Her brown eyes were extremely intelligent and she spoke with them.

Henry had found himself a very exceptional woman. Even as I was introduced, I speculated on how she would find Siam. This girl had come from comfort and sophistication. She was at the height of her glory.

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She would be something new in the British colony of Siam.

I spent a week with them in Bangkok, a hectic week, for every bachelor mess in the city and all the embassies wished to see the sensational English bride. Ruth had a royal progress of flattery and genuine admiration.

I had a long talk with Henry, concealing nothing. After I had told him everything he said, " Yes, but she did accept? She knew it was inevitable? She accepted the money for her future son, she said. I suppose that means she accepted the situation."

Henry was silent for a few moments, thinking.

" Gerald, could you do one more thing for me? I know it's asking too much. Could you ride with us as far as Muang Sutep? I'd feel happier if you were there just for a day or two."

" Does that mean you have not told Ruth? "

" How could I tell her? You've met her. She could have almost any man. She chose me. How could I tell her that I had a native wife already? She would have laughed and said, ' Well, that's that, isn't it? ' And I should not have seen her again."

" I'll come with you, Henry."

He really was grateful this time. His life, I felt, was on a razor's edge. If all went well, heaven beckoned. If not, disaster loomed ahead, or so it seemed.

The whirl of parties in Bangkok ended and we were free to go north. Ruth seemed pleased.

She certainly adapted herself in small ways to upcountry life. She dressed the part. Never had Chiengmai seen such habits, and in a Lao sarong she looked like a young goddess.

I made the journey to Muang Sutep with them. There was peace in Chiengmai. No sign of Chow Kavalongse. No sign of Wanta. No peril, it seemed. Yet I was glad to be on our way. We made a leisurely pilgrimage. The journey was more bearable because of the long cool mornings before the sun gathered its full strength around noon.

I had no premonition of drama as we came down the hill to Henry's bungalow by the river. Muang Sutep was resting there as serenely as it always was. We walked up the path to the house and then I saw what in my inner consciousness I had dreaded. Wanta, clearly in child, was standing there waiting.

In moments of acute anguish, when personal relationships become suddenly unbearable, a whole series of conjectures and memories may charge through one's overwrought mind.

As we walked up the path to the bungalow, approaching Wanta, I had time to notice the beds of zinnias, gay and colourful, that lined the path, but through my mind raced the whole history of my friendship with Henry.

I asked myself now what kind of a man he really was. Why did he plunge, unarmed, into these desperate situations? And how, having become immersed, did he manage to extricate himself, apparently unharmed?

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I thought that, in part at least, I knew the answer. Henry relied instinctively on his charm to get him out of any difficulty. With women this was nearly always successful. He had only to look at them with those remarkable green eyes of his to be able to send them a message they could not resist.

He was at the same time considerate and selfish. Thus in small ways he showed quite charming traits of concern for his friends—he would go out of his way to buy a lovely, unique gift for a birthday or an anniversary. But then he would shake one's assessment of him by being so monstrously self-centred that one could hardly believe it was the same man. Perhaps it wasn't. For it was usually women who provoked his selfishness. When he was excited by a woman he swept everything else aside. He became an absorbed animal. I think this was why each new love affair wiped out the memory of the last. His body completely ruled his mind when he was in love.

Love, according to Henry, had an animal side, and a godlike side. The godlike attributes were those that made people in love cherish one another, but the animal side of love was much more common and here for us to enjoy. It did not do anyone any harm, he said, but very often, by releasing inhibitions and smashing frustrations, it did a great deal of good . . .

All this occurred to me again before I reached the verandah steps. As Ruth saw Wanta standing there, she knew that Wanta was Henry's mistress. Wanta knew, without being told, that Ruth was his new foreign, legal wife. The two women needed no explanation.

It was Wanta who spoke first and her words were the ones I expected and feared. " Nai, we are going to have a child."

She called him " Nai " again, reverting to her own people.

Ruth turned on Henry. " Why did you not tell me you had a mistress? You could have paid her off before I came . . ."

I started to explain but Wanta cut me short, and now her voice was the hard, impassioned voice of a woman fighting for something more than her man. She was a mother fighting for her child. She turned to Ruth and her words blazed from her as she stood there.

" I am not his mistress. I am his wife by the custom of this country. I am bearing him our child. You are in Siam now and you cannot steal my husband from me. If you did—" and her voice dropped to a whisper—" I would kill you, and what use would he be to you then? "

As she said this she beat her breasts with her hands, crouching like an animal at bay, crouching to spring. She did spring so quickly that, had it not been for Henry, she would have reached Ruth and torn her with those fine teeth of hers, biting her face until it was wounded and discoloured, in a frenzy of anger. Henry caught her before she reached her prey and she stormed and sobbed in his arms until at last she fainted and was still.

I called for water and we revived her. I think that it was the sight of both of us bent over Wanta that angered Ruth. She

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swore like a man. " Can't you leave her alone for a moment? "

Henry turned on her. " She has my child in her womb," he said.

Wanta came round and immediately spoke to Ruth again. She was a Siamese princess now, her voice low and imperative. " Leave us now." And, as Ruth stood there, she pointed to the door saying, " Go. Go. Go. Never come back here."

Suddenly Ruth made a movement. " I can't stay here," she said. " I must go to Bangkok. To England. You must stay, Henry. It would never be any good after this. We are finished."

Henry nodded. " I know." He looked at Wanta. " I know. It was my fault." He was near tears now, submerged by his own folly. I offered to return with Ruth. Ruth and Henry spoke together privately for the last time.

When Ruth came out she said, " It's all over between us. The little bride goes home." And for the first time I saw grief on that lovely, eager face.

And so it was that Ruth came back with me to Chiengmai, and soon was on her way back to Britain. She divorced Henry and married again within a year. She must have found happiness for she wrote to me:

Do you know, Gerald, it all seems like a dream now—the visit to Siam, I mean. The voyage out with Henry. That lovely ten days in Bangkok, our journey, the ride to Muang Sutep, and then that lovely girl fighting for her " husband." My husband. I think I was right to retreat. It would never have worked out after that. I have Henry as a delightful memory who took me chasing halfway round the world. Now I've settled for someone else. You'd like him. Stock Exchange. Golf on Sunday. Cannes in June. House at Virginia Water, as you see. Come and see me when you are on leave. We'll have a Bangkok evening again.

It was a sweet letter, but it did not cover up the tragedy that had occurred.

I did not see Henry again until his marriage to Wanta. That was over a year after the birth of their son. It was a son, as Wanta had always said it would be. They were married in Chiengmai. First at the British Consulate, secondly at their own Siamese ceremony. The old Chow Luang, as kindly a Buddhist as it was possible to meet, had not been able to bear the thought of Wanta being exiled from her own people and a stranger to her family. To the anger of Chow Kavalongse and Chow Rart, who refused to attend the ceremony, Wanta and Henry had their Siamese marriage in his Palace.

I rode out to meet them as they came into Chiengmai. I was, I think, apprehensive. I did not know whether Henry would ever really get over his passion for Ruth or forgive Wanta for destroying it. But he had done so.

Wanta was radiant. She had reverted to her English ways and insisted that they should go on their honeymoon to Singapore. " I want to get out of Siam for a while. There is a claustrophobia

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here. I love it, but we must have a break. Henry has promised on our next leave to fly me to London. Then I shall know all the tricks of the trade." She looked at Henry. "Escape me never."

"I don't want to escape, not now."

He was happy, too.

The British Consul-General married them, reading the short service in his crisp, English voice.

It was a cool, clear ceremony. They signed the register. I signed as one of the witnesses.

When a telegram arrived from Henry saying that he and Wanta were coming into Chiengmai to spend December, including Christmas, in the city I was delighted. They were due on the 2nd and I wired back insisting that they should both stay with me. A week later came a letter saying they would do so, and were bringing Pra Chorn and Three Socks with them. They had sent their son, who had been given the names of Henry Chula, back to Britain by air to be cared for by his grandmother. I saw no special significance in it. But when I told our friends, they said, "They are wise, those two. They look at the sky and see the storm gathering."

They arrived on time and never have I seen Henry happier. He was bursting with some news that excited and intrigued him, and that evening he told me what it was.

"We had to ride hard to make it today, Gerald, because I have to be at the station tomorrow at four-thirty."

"Why? Are you seeing off someone by the express?"

Henry laughed. "If my information is correct, old boy, I'm going to make a fortune. Do you know what the reward for information leading to the capture of illicit opium is?"

"I should do. Ten per cent or less at the discretion of the Government in cases where the information has helped but not been the sole factor in arresting the contraband."

"I'm the 'sole factor' in this case, and the amount is said to be very large indeed. You remember the two brothers who were lured away to work for Kavalongse? Well, they returned to us, as you know, and I had to allow them to smoke to keep them alive and happy. The younger of the two, Art, got this information almost by accident. He gave it to me, hoping, I expect, for a few extra pipes. I've checked it. It's true."

"I think you're mad on this subject. Very well, there is opium on the train. You seize it, or the police seize it on your information. You get your reward, but what use is it to you? They'll kill you as certainly as the sun will rise tomorrow. Surely you know that?"

"It's a funny thing, Gerald, I don't believe it. I know it should happen, but I don't think it will. My hunches seem to tell me the future more surely than logic."

"I hope to God you're right."

I did not want to accompany Henry and Wanta to the station, but Henry said, "You'll see something that no one has seen for a

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very long time." So we motored down together. Colonel Wuthisart of the Chiengmai Police was already there and he greeted Henry. "My men have searched every inch of the train, Mr. Paget. There is nothing. We are afraid your information is wrong. There is a large consignment of Government opium, over half a ton, but it's under strong police guard, men from Bangkok. It's very valuable, you see, worth over half a million sterling."

Henry said, "That's it. Arrest those 'police.' You will find them bogus. The Government marks have been forged."

The Police Colonel made an exclamation of startled surprise. "It can't be. Wait a minute. I'll speak to the sergeant in charge."

The opium was packed in neat ten-pound cases in the last truck but one.

Colonel Wuthisart placed his men round the truck and spoke to the sergeant.

We heard him say, "I'm not satisfied. I am arresting you." In a flash the "sergeant" and his four men ran for it, darting with great agility and speed through the crowd. The "sergeant" tripped over a suitcase flung in his path and was caught, but his accomplices escaped.

Colonel Wuthisart came up to Henry and shook him by the hand. "You've won yourself a great fortune, Mr. Paget. I don't know how you obtained your information, but you will certainly be paid."

But the fifty thousand pounds that Henry was entitled to as reward for information that led to the capture of the largest consignment of illicit opium ever seized in Siam was not to be paid for four long, dangerous, and dreadful years, for that evening we received news from Bangkok that the Siamese Government had surrendered without a fight. A Japanese-Thai alliance was confirmed by the fact that the newspaper was now in Japanese hands. The paper had been British subsidised, but now the lion and the unicorn over the leader column had been replaced by the entwined flags of Japan and Siam, and in the leader itself I read, with surprised horror, that certain bombing incidents near the Malay border were described as being the work of the "Anglo-American monsters."

Next day the paper came out in full warpaint with the slogan:

ONE NATION, THAILAND, ONE AIM, VICTORY,
ONE LEADER, BIPUL SONGRAM!

It was war, and we, what were we? Enemies?

As soon as we saw this, I said, "You must escape at once. They'll be here on the next express . . ."

"But how?"

"Henry, you take Pra Chorn. You and Wanta should be on your way now. Make for the Burma border . . ."

Within minutes they made their preparations, taking nothing with them but money and Nai Sorn, the mahout of Pra Chorn. Pra Chorn, Henry said, would carry them to safety.

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That afternoon I rode out with them to the track that leads over the mountains by the Three Pagodas to Burma, two hundred long, hard miles. Nai Sorn pointed the head of Pra Chorn up the single track and, as if knowing the urgency of his task, Pra Chorn quickened his pace and strode off west.

I promised to be careful, but when the little yellow apes arrived before dawn they dragged me out of bed, threatened to shoot me, relented, then carted me off to prison in Bangkok.

For Henry and me, tragedy, the great explosion, had been averted, but Henry was fleeing Siam with Wanta on Pra Chorn and I was at Ta Prachan, Bangkok, a prisoner of the Japanese.

It was a long four years of torture and tears. Then, in September 1945, a shout of gladness went up from the hundreds of millions of people whom the Japanese had subjected in terror, and held by a regime of brutality without equal anywhere. The two atom bombs had been dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. When the news came through that three hundred thousand Japanese had died or been half roasted the prisoner next to me voiced the feelings of us all, " At last the little yellow bastards have got their own medicine."

It was the justest retribution. Moreover, the two bombs and only the bombs secured the surrender, saving thousands of Allied lives. If ever an act of war gladdened the hearts of men it was the atom bombs on the Japanese cities.

Siam was saved by the Free Thai movement from the direst consequences of defeat. The voice of Winston Churchill came to us in our camp: " All will be liberated. It is total victory."

I retired from the Ministry. The International Courts had not survived the war. General Slim came to talk to us. " Never forget that the men under my command—British and Indian —accounted for more Japanese dead than were slain in any other battle of this war."

I set up in private legal practice with the generous permission of the Siamese Bar. Very soon the clients were coming in. But among my first visitors was a brown little man in khaki. I looked at him again. Why, yes, it was Nai Sorn, the mahout of Pra Chorn. In the army now.

He saluted and I shook his hand.

" Come in. Come in. Tell me about your master."

Nai Sorn placed his hat and cane carefully on a table, grinned, and said, " We made it, Nai.

" You remember you saw us off? Well, the Japanese were very close behind us. They were in Chiengmai at dawn. We had just four hours' start. They found out that Nai had escaped. They tortured his head boy by sticking burning cigarettes up his nostrils. He had to tell them the route that we had taken. They were on our track riding fresh Shan ponies. They could commandeer fresh ponies all along the route. No man dared deny them anything. You had but to hesitate to have water pumped into

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your belly for them to jump on, or for your fingernails to be slowly extracted. You know what they are like, Nai."

I nodded.

"By the rules they should have caught us, but they never did. Because of Pra Chorn. You know, Nai, that sometimes there are kingly beasts who understand the ways of men, and give their love to one man. Such an elephant was Pra Chorn. He lives still in good retirement in Mandalay. Pra Chorn knew we were being hunted. He knew that if the pursuit caught up with us it was death for Nai and torture and rape for Mem."

Wanta, I noticed, was "mem" again.

"I think I told you that Pra Chorn made his own working hours. He would march from dawn till ten a.m., no more. But now he marched through the day and half the night—and, Nai, never did an elephant take the giant strides that Pra Chorn took, never did an elephant march so fast.

"Fortunately it was December, Nai, as you remember. Had it been April we could never have escaped. They would have caught up with us the day after leaving Chiengmai, for not even Pra Chorn could have battled against the heat of the spring or early summer. But for us the nights were quite cold and only the noon hours of the day warm. It was cool until eleven and cool again soon after three. To this alone we owed our good fortune. In those seven shining December days Pra Chorn averaged more than thirty miles a day, sometimes nearly forty. And always he carried his howdah, for the Princess could not walk, and I had to be on the neck of Pra Chorn. Sometimes Nai would walk, at other times, ride.

"At first we did not realise how perilously close the Japanese were, but on the fourth day we knew it. There is a point beyond the Three Pagodas where a great ravine holds a river. Not a great river, little more than a torrential stream except in the rains, when it is a turbulent river. We passed across easily, the three of us on Pra Chorn. He was always superb in water, footsure and cunning. We pulled out of the stream and climbed the far side of the ravine, fifteen hundred yards or more. We had almost reached the summit when I heard a shot, then another, then the deadly stutter of a bren gun.

"Have you ever been exposed to bren-gun fire, Nai? It is a terror. There is no place to conceal one's body. Nai threw himself over his wife, but it was not us they were aiming for. It was the far easier target of Pra Chorn. I could see the bullets eating up the dirt around him when he charged for the summit. The fire followed him, but Pra Chorn swerved and swayed. By some miracle or the intervention of Buddha he was not hit. Had he been, the Japanese knew very well we were at their mercy. Somehow, swerving and darting separately, we reached the top of the ridge, but each of us had a hidden fear. Had Pra Chorn panicked?

"I, Nai, was most concerned of all, for if my elephant had failed us I would have wept with humiliation and shame.

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" Nai, too, was worried, he told me afterwards, for elephants are panicked by gunfire though they will face all other kinds of battle, perhaps because in the old days the kings rode them to war. I need not have worried, Nai.

" As soon as I crawled over the ridge, safe at last, there he was, waiting for us. He had only gone far enough to protect his body from the line of the Japanese fire.

" I recaptured him at once, for he came towards us lifting the Princess first on his great trunk and setting off faster than ever as soon as I was on his neck and Nai was with his wife in the howdah. We had had a grim experience but at least we knew now how far behind us the Japanese were. No more at this time than half a mile, though this included the climb of the gorge which was equivalent to three miles. So we had barely an hour to spare.

" Pra Chorn knew this, too, and redoubled his efforts. He was not marching now but surging forward at a great springing leap that ate up the miles. He had the courage of a lion, Nai, and he gave us courage, too. When we fed and watered him now, it was as one of us. He was no longer a beast but a friend who protected us at least as much as we protected him.

" I think, Nai, that owing to the prodigious effort of Pra Chorn we gained a few hours on the Japanese that day and the following night. I remember that there was a pale lemon moon in its first quarter and I said to my master, ' The Lao have a saying that the waxing moon brings good fortune.' He smiled then, and said that we'd need it.

" I could not help thinking that we kept ahead of the Japanese because we knew the path and they did not, and I often wondered whether the country people, when the Japanese asked for information, told them tales that would set them in the wrong direction. If they did it was a brave but very dangerous game. How dangerous it was we learnt towards the end of that march.

" We had passed near a little village called Kohmit. It was but a hamlet, Nai, but the path to Burma was lost here in a confusion of buffalo tracks and cartwheel marks. It appears the Japanese asked the way, and the villagers, guessing they were pursuing us, gave them false information. We only knew this a little later, for a villager escaped to join our party and he had a terrible tale to tell.

" We had seen a great fire burning in the village after our departure but thought no more of it, for after the harvest as you know the farmers often light bonfires and dance the Ramwong to celebrate.

" But the fire we had seen was no celebration.

" The villager who joined us and begged us to take him with us to Burma, to fight against the Japs, had lost his mother. She was the old woman who had told the Japanese a pack of lies that delayed them nearly five hours. They were livid with rage, Nai. They stormed back into the village and they poured petrol over the old woman and her nephew and two young girls and tied

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them to a tree. Then they set them alight. It was a human torch we had seen.

" They got correct information after that, as you can imagine, and now again they were pursuing us.

" Fortune still favoured us. We could easily have been caught even in the last twenty miles, for the Japanese were angry now and beating their ponies to death, then changing them and shooting the discarded ones. We were very near the end when the path split. Nai said, ' Here's our chance,' and we turned Pra Chorn up the wrong path for two miles, then crossed jungle to the real path. The ground was soft here and the Japanese would see his giant footmarks. To make doubly sure we left a water can as if we had dropped it before we doubled across to the Burma track. I think that trick saved us.

" The Japanese must have taken that decoy turning, for they were not hard on our heels again until the last ten miles. That final stretch over swamp and close jungle was the worst, as I remember it.

" It was then that they almost caught us. I think they feared now that they might lose us after all their efforts, and if they lost us they would lose face with their commander as well as with the village people whom they wished to teach a lesson that would be burnt into their memories, the lesson that everyone obeys a soldier of His Imperial Majesty the Emperor of Japan.

" One of their number must have had a pony stronger or fresher than the rest, for a little Japanese corporal, armed with a bren gun as well as a revolver, came riding after us alone. He spurred his pony towards us at a storming gallop, and I thought, This is it. He can hold us here at gunpoint until his comrades arrive. On the other hand if we shot him, not as far as we knew yet being at war with Japan, they would say we were murderers and would torture us before we died. We held our fire, but not even the desperate efforts of Pra Chorn could escape this pursuer.

" I was sitting in my usual position kicking the back of Pra Chorn's ears, begging him to go faster, faster. But we could hear the Jap coming up in a flurry of cries behind us, calling to us to halt.

" Then Pra Chorn swung round in a split second and without an order from me seized the mounted Japanese in his trunk, shaking him until I thought he would die, but he only dropped his arms and cried out for mercy. Pra Chorn in his charge had sent the man's pony spinning to the ground and now in one furious gesture he trod on the prostrate beast, sending its belly belching out over the green grass.

" The Princess cried out with horror but we were moving again towards the border with the Japanese, his hands bound behind him, our prisoner.

" I say ' our prisoner,' Nai, but he was not. He was Pra Chorn's prisoner. Pra Chorn in those last hours would not let the little man out of his sight. When he halted at noon as we had to, and our prisoner made as if to go off on his own, Pra Chorn seized him

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again and shook him terrifyingly. He did not try any tricks after that. It was just as well. I could see murder in the eye of Pra Chorn. But it was an appalling sight. The elephant had now dominion over the man. The Jap was in abject terror of his captor. It was against nature, Nai, the man being captive of the beast. I had never seen such a thing before, nor do I wish to see it again.

"It seemed as if Pra Chorn was determined to keep his prisoner at all costs, for before we reached the border he had terrified the man to such an extent that he would make not the slightest move without looking apprehensively at Pra Chorn. If Pra Chorn waved his trunk menacingly, the little soldier would stand, frozen.

"Our last moment of danger came as we approached the frontier post of Melip—just two or three huts and a gate barrier with a small Siamese police guard. The Japs had come up again and were close enough to fire at us while galloping, but either they were not close enough to hit us or the movement of their mounts made their aim too erratic, for no one was hit.

"We had one more desperate hazard. If the Siamese frontier guard delayed us we were lost, for we had no doubt that these determined and vengeful Japanese would secure our surrender.

"Then Pra Chorn did his last deed on that journey, Nai, that has earned him my undying love. He stormed through the Siamese guard and on through the barrier gate as if it were matchwood. We were in British Burma. The Japanese dared not cross the frontier and risk being taken prisoners themselves.

"There was a British officer there and ten men. Nai went up to the officer and said, 'We have come to fight against the Japanese.'

"The officer looked at the Princess. He looked at the villager who had joined us, he looked at me, and he looked at our trembling Japanese. Finally he looked at Pra Chorn who stood there, proud but exhausted, a King in the sun.

"'Come to fight against the Japs? What, all of you?'

"'Yes,' said Nai, 'all of us except our prisoner.'

"And fight we all did. Nai became a Major, and I was his batman at first. The villager fought with us, and he didn't take any prisoners—alive. Mem, she became a nurse and Pra Chorn worked in an army camp, making his own working hours as you may be sure, but he was lucky, for he secured a man of dignity and understanding to work with him. The Government gave him a pension at the end, he's resting now in Mandalay."

"The Princess and Nai, will they be coming back to Siam?"

"I don't think so, Nai. You see, the Siamese Government granted Nai his reward for the opium seizure. It was paid out of Siamese funds frozen in London during the war. It was much money. Nai has taken a farm, I believe . . ."

The little man delved into an inner pocket and from a number of crumpled papers produced an envelope addressed to me. I opened it. On a sheet of ship's notepaper Wanta had written: *Gerald, darling, as soon as ever you can, come to Bovey Tracey, Devon, where we will be.*

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I put the letter in my file that I kept for private papers.
"And what will happen to you, Nai Sorn?"
"Tomorrow, Nai, the army release me."
"Would you like to come and get my garden in order?"
The little mahout's face broke into a grin of pure pleasure. "Oh, Nai," he said, "that is what I should like to do."

No Other Elephant is to be published by Jarrolds in October

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THE PARROT

AN old Danish shipowner sat and thought of his young days and of how he had, when he was sixteen years old, spent a night in a brothel in Singapore. He had come in there with the sailors of his father's ship, and had sat and talked with an old Chinese woman. When she heard he was a native of a distant country she brought out an old parrot that belonged to her.

Long, long ago, she told him, the parrot had been given her by a high-born English lover of her youth. The boy thought that the bird must then be a hundred years old. It could say various sentences in the languages of all the world, picked up in the cosmopolitan atmosphere of the house. But one phrase the old China-woman's lover had taught it before he sent it to her, and that she did not understand, neither had any visitor ever been able to tell her what it meant. So now for many years she had given up asking. But if the boy came from far away perhaps it was his language, and he could interpret the phrase to her.

The boy had been deeply, strangely moved at the suggestion. When he looked at the parrot, and thought that he might hear Danish from that terrible beak, he very nearly ran out of the house. He stayed on only to do the old Chinese woman a service.

But when she made the parrot speak its sentence, it turned out to be classic Greek. The bird spoke its words very slowly, and the boy knew enough Greek to recognise it; it was a verse from Sappho.

The moon has sunk and the Pleiads,
And midnight is gone,
And the hours are passing, passing,
And I lie alone.

The old woman, when he translated the lines to her, smacked her lips and rolled her small slanting eyes. She asked him to say it again, and nodded her head.

ISAK DINESEN

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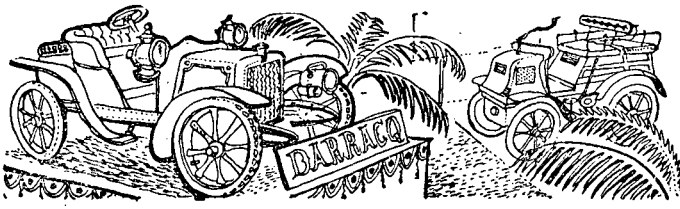

Car Carnival

MAY 1896
TO THE NOBILITY & GENTRY
THE GREAT HORSELESS CARRIAGE CO. LTD.
Has the Honour to Present
THE TWIN-CYLINDER 6 H.P. WAGONETTE

This NOVEL vehicle is propelled by an INTERNAL COMBUSTION ENGINE of 2 cylinders and 6 horse power relying on petroleum for its motive force. THE MECHANICAL carriage will attain the comfortable speed of TWELVE MILES PER HOUR on the level while hills can be ascended and descended in safety. The Daimler Wagonette is admirably suited to the needs of the SPORTSMAN and lover of the countryside giving as it does full facilities for the enjoyment of FRESH AIR AND AN UNINTERRUPTED VIEW OF THE SCENERY.

A new mode of transport that has undoubtedly come to stay—
vide Daily Press

Look Out, Take Cover . . .

Gangway, everybody, hold your hats,
Curb your dogs and leash your cats,
Embrace your young in parental clasp,
Breathe in deep and prepare to gasp,
Feel your pulse grow rapid and joggly,
Open your eyes and goggle agogly,
Hitch your wonderment to a star—
Here comes me in a brand-new car.

My natal day I will not curse.
I've three speeds forward and one reverse.
The backward speed I truly adore,

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Yet love the forward three times more.
Upon this car I am a doter;
Golly, it's even got a motor!
Nothing so much a car improves
As when you start it up, it moves . . .

OGDEN NASH

Spirit of the Woods

There I was, miles from any village, with not even a farmhouse in sight. On my left was a thick wood, out of which the figure of a man suddenly appeared. He asked me what was the matter, and I said I had run out of petrol. "It just happens," he told me, "that I have a can of petrol." With that, he went back into the woods, and came out again with a five-gallon can of gasoline. He put it in the tank for me, I thanked him, paid for it, and drove on.

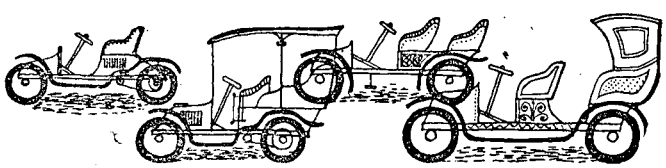
Once when I was telling this true but admittedly remarkable story, at a party in New York, a bright-eyed young woman exclaimed, "But when the man emerged from the lonely woods, miles away from any village, far from the nearest farmhouse, carrying a five-gallon can of gasoline, why didn't you ask him how he happened to be there with it?" I lighted a cigarette. "Madam," I said, "I was afraid he would vanish."

JAMES THURBER, *Recollections of the Gas Buggy*

First Things First

at eleven o clock
p m on last saturday evening
i received the following
message on my
own private radio set
good evening little archibald
and how are you
this is mars speaking . . .
tell us all about
your planet said mars
well i said it is
round like an orange
or a ball
and it is all cluttered
up with automobiles . . .

don marquis,
archy hears from mars



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LADY IN THE DARK

By VICTOR CANNING

FROM the bus shelter on the far side of the road he saw the only lighted window of the third floor flat go black. His eyes came down to the swing doors of the entrance to the building. The light came warmly through the entrance to the cold of the thickening dusk.

After a little while a girl passed through the doors and paused at the top of the steps, pulling the thin fur collar of her coat close up about her neck. He watched her come down the steps, turn to the left, and disappear along the darkening road. He had plenty of time. She would be gone for two hours, he knew. He knew so many things. It wasn't difficult to find out all you wanted to know—so long as you were patient and intelligent.

He crossed the road, feeling the wet autumn leaves slip a little under his feet. He passed the main entrance, turned the corner of the building, and went through a side door. Service stairs, guarded with an iron rail, stretched bleakly upwards, grey and institutional under naked bulbs. He climbed to the third floor and with his gloved hands pushed open a small door on the landing. He came out into a chandelier-lit stretch of thickly carpeted corridor.

Away on his right he heard the whine of the lift coming down from the higher floors. He waited until it had passed and then went along to the front door at the far end of the corridor. A brilliantly polished brass plate read *Mrs. Walter Courtenay.*

He turned the handle and went in. It was never locked when the maid went out. The old lady didn't like to be locked in. If she rang for the porter she didn't want to have to come and fiddle with a key. Not at her age, not the way she was. He stood just by the door but inside him was a confident feeling of familiarity with the flat. Four months ago the identical flat on the floor below had been vacant. He had looked it over.

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He turned and reached up above the door and with a pair of pliers nipped the thin wire of the bell. He hated uniformity of design, but it had its advantages. In all the flats the bell wires ran the same course.

He crossed the little hallway to the door of the sitting-room, a room which he knew overlooked the street from which he had watched the flat. But it was not in this room that the light had gone out. That had been in the maid's room to the left. He went in boldly, closing the door firmly behind him.

At once a voice said, " Who is that? " It was the first time he had heard her voice and it was much as he had expected, thin, fragile—like herself, for she must be over eighty—yet with a touch of authority, that pervading tone which he hated, because he would never have it, of culture, wealth, and of easy times and rich places . . . in fact, the whole damned snobbish aristocratic who-are-you-my-man note.

He said, " Never mind who I am. And don't trouble yourself to start ringing bells. I've cut the wires. And don't get alarmed. I'm not going to hurt you."

He went forward and sat down on a chair by the big flat desk. There was a certain amount of light in the room from the street lamps and he could just see her sitting in a stiff chair on the other side of the desk. He could make out the white hair, the erect back, the dull gleam of a cameo brooch at the throat of her dress, and could smell a faintish lavender scent. She had her hands up a little and he saw that she had been knitting when he entered the room.

She said, " It's a most extraordinary introduction. What do you want? "

" I want the key to your safe."

"And a most impertinent demand."

He stirred in his chair, feeling the anger in him rise. The thing was now so nearly over and done with that he was impatient. You got impatient if you lived for a thing for years, got easily angry in front of this kind of talk.

" I said I wouldn't hurt you. I won't. I just want your key. Your maid's out for two hours. You can't ring for the porter. There's nothing you can do."

She moved forward a little in her chair and put her knitting down on the desk. But he noticed, even in the gloom, that one hand still played nervously with a long knitting needle. She might seem in control of herself, but she was nervous all right. That suited him.

" I understand. And when you have the key, I presume you will take my jewels? "

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"That's right." He laughed. "They add up to a good life for me from now on."

"So you have not had a good life—as you call it—up to now?"

"I'll say I haven't."

"I see . . . you are that kind of young man."

"How do you know I'm a young man?"

She shook her head gently and her hand tapped nervously on the desk blotter. "I have been blind for twenty years, but that only makes it easier to tell some things. You have a young man's voice. You carry a great load of resentment with you, too. You feel that you have been denied privileges, but you are a fool to imagine that this is the way to right such things."

"Just give me the key. You can tell the police later that your jewels were taken by an under-privileged young man who never went to a decent school. It'll be a great help to them in picking me out from about ten million others."

He pulled a case from his pocket and lit himself a cigarette. For a moment the flare of his lighter showed up the old lady's face, a small, delicate, withered face, like some pale fruit. "I want that key. If you won't give it to me, I shall take it from the chain you wear about your neck."

"Listen to me, young man—" momentarily anger livened the frail voice at the suggestion of such an assault, and she tapped with her knitting needle at the desk, calling him to order—"I have no intention of giving you the key. What is more, I advise you to leave at once. I can give the police a much better description of you than you imagine. But if you go now I will forget this unpleasant interlude."

"You don't frighten me, and I've wasted enough time. The key!"

"Once more, for your own good, young man, listen to me. Go away at once. Go away and work for the things you want. Do you think because I am blind that I am helpless? Of course I'm not! I know already a great deal about you which would help the police if you took my jewels. A young man, about five feet ten—voices come from different levels, you know—and wearing a bowler hat, but probably not carrying an umbrella because you wear a raincoat. I can hear it crackle as you move. And I am glad to know that you had the courtesy to take your hat off when you came into this room. Also the grace to be nervous—for you are constantly tapping at the top of your bowler hat as you hold it on your knee. And from the tap I am fairly sure that you are wearing gloves. Also you smoke—without my permission—some kind of American cigarette. It is certainly not English."

He laughed contemptuously. "It's still a description which

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would fit thousands and thousands in this country. Why should you worry about your jewels? You've got plenty of money. But I haven't. I'm going to have a taste of the things you've enjoyed all your life."

The old lady was silent for a moment, and then she said quietly, "You would take my jewels because they mean money. I never regard them that way. To me, they are memories. They all mean something in my life. If you think I am handing you the key to my safe so that you can walk out of here with my memories you are mistaken."

He stood up, anger spurting in him now. "You're a stupid old woman. What do I care about your memories, about your past? Each jewel a memory!" He laughed harshly. "Well, I'll tell you what I think of your memories. Your husband's photograph in the gold and emerald locket. The lock of hair from your child in the back of the diamond brooch—memories are worth nothing to me. Jewels mean money. Just that for me."

As he moved to go round the desk, her head came up from the position of relapse into which it had sunk at his outburst. Her hands shook with a rapid, indignant movement, and she said vigorously, "Don't dare to come near me! Don't dare, you monster!"

"Then give me the key!"

"You fool—you stupid fool! Go away!"

But he did not go away. He moved slowly round the desk and stood at her side. If it had to be this way, it had to be. He had come too far, dreamt too long of this, to back away now. Even so, there was something in him which hesitated at the thought of using force on such an old woman.

He paused at the side of the desk, seeing her pale oval face dimly through the gloom of the room as she turned in her seat to face him, and he said, "Come on, the key. You've got no choice." He nipped out his cigarette with gloved fingers and put the stub in his pocket carefully.

But she shook her head. "I will do nothing to help you. Nothing."

He lost his temper then. He stepped towards her, reached out, and grabbed her by the shoulder, feeling the frailness of her body under his hands. She jabbed at his hand with her knitting needle and he caught at her wrists with one hand and held her. Swearing to himself as she squirmed and wriggled, his free hand went to her neck, searching for the chain. He jerked it free, tossed it into the palm of his hand and felt the shape of the safe key.

It was then that he heard her groan and felt her body slump back from him, pulling at the hand with which he held her

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wrists. She collapsed limply into her chair and he let her wrists go. She made no move.

He stood there for a moment, undecided. She was an old lady. He didn't want it to be true. He had never meant it this way. It couldn't be true. In a few moments she would recover. He went over to the wall and found the picture that covered the safe. It couldn't be true. She would have come round by the time he had collected what he wanted. Nothing could be allowed to stop him now. Not after all the weeks of patient work . . . listening to her maid talking to her boyfriend in the saloon bar three miles from here where she went on her night off . . . his back to them, his ears wide. The safe behind the picture, the chain with the key about her neck. All the work and patience.

He piled the jewel cases into the pockets of his raincoat and when the safe was empty he went back to the old lady. He put his hand on her heart, felt her pulse. It was true. It *was* true! She was gone. Shock. Excitement.

Well, what did it matter? He had what he wanted. Perhaps it was just as well it was like this—she couldn't even tell the police the few pathetic scraps she had gleaned about him.

At ten o'clock the next morning Detective-Inspector Burrows walked into the small but high-class jeweller's shop of Albert Munster and Son to keep an appointment he had made earlier over the telephone with the manager.

Alone with the manager in his office, Burrows said, "I believe a Mrs. Walter Courtenay was a customer of yours?"

"That is so. Once every two years her jewellery came here to be cleaned."

"How many people in this shop would handle the stuff?"

"There are only three of us here—myself, my assistant, and the man we have in the workshop who does the actual cleaning."

Burrows looked across at the manager. He was very short, fat, and well over sixty. He said, "I don't think you fit the bill."

"What bill, Inspector?"

"Of the person who last night robbed Mrs. Courtenay of her jewels. She was found dead by her maid."

"Dead! How terrible. Poor Mrs. Courtenay. But—but, Inspector, what has this to do with us?"

"You'll see." Burrows fished a piece of paper from his pocket. "What I want is a young man, not a public school type, height about five ten, smokes American cigarettes, wears a bowler and a raincoat. What about your workshop man?"

"He's as old as I am. And takes snuff. The description fits young Grierson. But he's not a bad young chap. He's been

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with me for eight years." He shook his head. "Good lord—Mrs. Courtenay dead. I can't believe it."

"It's true enough."

"But what makes you think it's young Grierson?"

"She lived alone with her maid. Never wore the jewels since she went blind twenty years ago. Maid had never seen them. They only left the flat once every two years to come here for cleaning. She knew the thief came from your shop."

"But how could she have told you? She's dead, you say."

"She was a gallant old lady. Blind, but not helpless. More than a match for your young Grierson. He came in to her and, I imagine, there was some talk between them while she refused to hand over the key. And while they talked, unknown to him, she was making notes about him."

Burrows referred to his slip of paper and read, "*Young man. Not gentleman. Bowler hat. Gloves. Raincoat. American cigarettes. Angry. Knows jewel details well. Walter in locket. Edith's hair in brooch. Must be from Munster and Son.*"

Burrows put the paper back in his pocket. "Yes, she was no fool. The room was in darkness. She was blind, but right under his nose she wrote it all down on the nice clean blotter on her desk. She wrote it in dots, sticking the point of her knitting needle into the soft blotting paper. Wrote it in dots, poor lady, just six dots that you can arrange into sixty-three combinations and which can tell you anything a blind person wants to tell you. Braille.

"I think you'd better send for young Grierson. Right under his nose—can you beat it? Tapping away with her knitting needle in the dark!"

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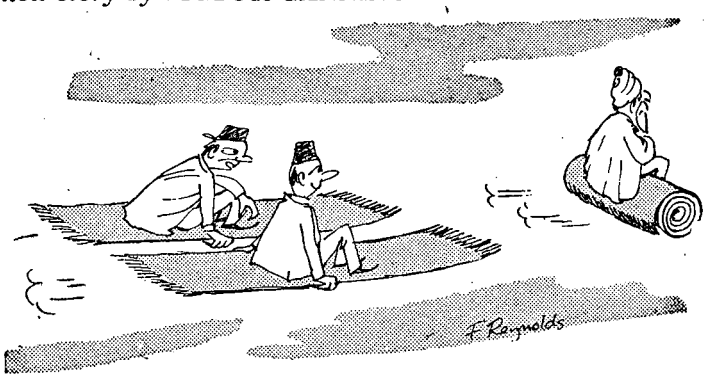
Next month: hilarious, fast-paced new story by VICTOR CANNING



"That's the Sultan, he prefers Rolls."

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GOLDEN MASK

BY MICHAEL FORRESTIER

I AM an archæologist, a member of professional societies in the United States and in Europe. I am an American, born in Ohio of American stock—although my maternal grandmother did have Latin-American blood, which accounts for my interest in her country. I have been working in southern Mexico on a research grant, a privilege not casually bestowed. I state this to show I am not an adventurer nor, I had thought, a murderer.

On this expedition I avoided the established centres of the ancient civilisations. I wanted to look at an almost unknown part of the land where, I hoped, the cultures of the Mixtecs, the Maya, and the mysterious Olmecs might have overlapped to produce something unique.

I scouted the territory in a chartered plane, picked a spot that looked as though it could be rewarding, and we started in six days ago. We drove our jeeps through dense jungle as far as we could until we reached the tiny settlement of Chimapan. From there we had to hack our way.

Since this was to be a tentative exploration, there were only Juan Carbajal and myself. Carbajal is—was—my Mexican colleague. I am required to have a member of the Mexican Department of Archæology with me, so I arranged for Juan because we have worked together before and are good friends. Juan is a pure-blooded Zapotecan, a lithe young scholar with a head full of Indian lore and an occasional wild streak of humour.

At first Juan was sceptical. "What do you expect to see in this rotting jungle? The richest finds occur around places like Mitla or Chichen Itza. Take a look at these dull Indians," he said. "The best we can hope for will be an inbred version of the true civilisations."

"That's precisely what I want. Remember the Lacandons?" I reminded him of a tribe to the south of us, whose existence had never been guessed at until a few years ago.

"You could be right," Juan admitted. "If only we may have such luck, Ricardo!" We always spoke to each other in Spanish.

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Flaunting warriors came, crested with plumes of parrot and macaw

Unfortunately for me, none of the Chimapan Indians, including their cacique, Dias, spoke a word of English. But I was lucky that Juan could understand them. He found they used a debased version of a Oaxacan dialect—he gloated over that—interspersed with a language he'd never heard before. Since Juan is a native of the hills of Oaxaca, he managed well enough.

He explained what we wanted. Every villager was anxious to work for us, but we persuaded Dias to select his strongest men, and they swung their machetes to open a path in the direction I indicated. It was a sweltering job, stinging insects were a painful irritation, and there was always the menace of jungle cats. At night round the fire we would hear their grumbling cough. It took us four days to cover ten kilometres; but when we got here it was worth every insect-bite, every drop of sweat. At dusk on the fourth day we reached this clearing and saw the pyramid.

The find was tremendously exciting. Darkness came swiftly, so we pitched our tent and sat there in the night at the base of the structure, peering up at its bulk against the stars. The setting was outside time; and Juan, who is sensitive to these things, spoke in whispers of the secrets the place must know. Neither of us could sleep; we sat in the dark and made guesses like a couple of awed schoolboys.

At dawn, in the moment when tropical birds make a jubilee of sound, we began to examine the pyramid. It was overrun with vines, parts had caved in and lay buried in the detritus of collapse; yet the flight of narrow steps was clear enough, with carvings of gape-jawed jaguar heads on its balustrades. Halfway up, a protuberance broke the ascent of the stairs, and terraces ran from it on each side.

Juan pointed to a path that led to the top of the pyramid. "It looks a well-worn track," he said. "Obviously these people know about the site and still use it."

"Why not? Even in places nearer to civilisation, the old gods are remembered."

"And debased," Juan said scornfully. "What do these savages know about the mighty days?"

We climbed the path, skirting mounds of earth and thorny cacti. There were traces of a temple on the top, but no altar stone. As we looked down from the height, shafts of the risen sun fingered through encroaching trees and marked the pattern of what was once a city, strangled now in the grip of roots.

I stood on the summit and shivered with anticipation. I

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wanted to lay bare this lost place and probe the history of its people. But how could I?

Juan knew what I felt. "We're not equipped," he said. "We had no idea this was here. We allowed so little time."

"A week," I agreed. "Ten days before the rains begin."

"The trails will be impassable. And, we have an engagement."

"I remember."

We were due in Oaxaca in a week, and from there we would go back into the mountains as guests of an isolated Zapotecan tribe at their religious ceremony to invoke the god of rain.

"Even so," I said, "we could cancel the appointment."

"No. We'll be trapped. We won't be able to move out of here for five months." Juan smiled crookedly. "We'd die of jungle rot."

He was right. We could not risk it; we hadn't the tools for the work that was to be done here.

"But let's take a few days," I argued. "We'll work like hell. We could start right here. For instance—" I pointed to the mound of rubble that clogged the stairs—"what's under there? The altar stone? Let's try that."

Juan laughed. "For a deliberate scientist, you're as anxious as a child! All right, we'll risk two days, but no more. If," he added, "we can get these degenerate Indians to work."

I noticed the villagers had not bothered to join us; they were sitting quietly below in the shade. I called to Dias, beckoned him up. When finally he came I managed, through Juan, to explain what I wanted.

Dias shook his head in refusal.

"Lazy dogs!" Juan said. "They don't even want to clean up their own pyramid." He turned to Dias and spat angry words at him.

For a calm minute the cacique stared at Juan, then he turned and went down to his men. We watched him speak to them. Presently they took their machetes, came straggling up, and began to dig.

Knives like cutlasses are not the most practical tools for shifting earth, but they loosened the soil and Juan and I pitched in with our hands, scooping and shovelling. White sun glared down and a myriad dancing midges bit like scorpions at our streaming flesh. Even my pipe, which I kept going as a smudge pot, scarcely discouraged them.

While digging, I remembered that Juan had called these Indians degenerate. I wondered at the strength of his word; they didn't seem so to me. They were quiet, friendly people, slow moving and shy, willing enough once I got my ideas across

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to them. I recalled how harshly Juan had spoken to the cacique. In all the years I had known him, Juan had never behaved like that. I thought it must be our frustrating position that rasped his nerves.

By afternoon we'd cleared enough to see that we were standing on a bare stone platform about six foot square, built out on the stairs. It was disappointing. We sat on the flat surface to catch our breath. Then one of those unspectacular accidents that so often rescue an archæologist gave me the luckiest break of my life.

My idling fingers followed a narrow trough in the stone before I became aware of what I was doing. I looked down and saw a rectangular joint, the edge of a stone slab in the platform. I worked my knife along the crack. The blade slipped through. I stamped on the stone; it rang hollow.

We heaved at it for an hour, until inch by labouring inch the stone came out. There was a deep space beneath, wide enough to admit a man. I glimpsed a shadowy incline going down into the pyramid's heart.

At this point, the Chimapan Indians refused to work. Juan cursed them furiously but they just stood there, looking away, not saying anything.

" Take it easy," I told Juan. " Maybe this is as big a surprise for them as it is for us."

I laid a friendly hand on Dias' shoulder to show we understood how they felt. After a while the cacique smiled gently back.

" Ask him if he knows anything about this," I said to Juan. " About the pyramid, or the people who once lived here. And for heaven's sake, ask him nicely! "

Juan moderated his voice, but there was still an edge of taunting dislike in it as the two men spoke back and forth. Then Juan turned away, shrugging.

" He denies knowledge of the place," Juan said. " He denies that his people knew the pyramid existed, or the ruins round it. They've never seen it before." He pulled out tobacco and rolled a cigarette. " Of course, they're lying," he said.

" It's a natural reaction. Ask him," I said, " if they are willing to follow us into the pyramid."

The Mexican spoke again. Dias said something to his men, then he nodded vigorously.

Juan went to fetch torches while I waited with the Indians, smiling at them, feeling balked and stupid because we couldn't understand each other's speech.

When Juan came back, I lowered myself into the hole, took my light, and went warily down. Juan followed, then Dias and the

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others. The light's beam glanced along a low, rough tunnel that sloped sharply downwards. It was narrow, so we had to walk in single file. The air was hot at first, but it grew cooler as we shuffled along. It was dry and heavy, but not foul. The passage took a sharp turn and continued lower until it opened into a small room at the end. We must have descended to the very base of the pyramid.

The chamber contained a huge flat basalt rock, its surface elaborate with pictographic writing. The way its mass was set into the floor, sealing the tomb below, was a marvel of engineering.

Juan brushed by me into the chamber. Suddenly the floor began to move under him. He yelled and leapt back. The rock had tilted noiselessly, opening a square of blackness at our feet from which arose a dead, archaic exhalation.

Juan swore. The Indians were silent.

Cautiously, I put the weight of my foot on the rock to pivot it farther, but it wouldn't open more than just that small space.

We knelt on the brink with Dias peering behind us, and flashed our lights into the tomb. Eight feet below, on a hard-packed earth floor, lay the leathery remains of a cadaver partly hidden in soft fabric. The glare caught sparks of vermilion and green, the dull glint of gold. There were painted pottery jars, bowls, and other objects set round the body. Our exploring circles of light rested on an angular skull, the skin drawn in austere dignity across the slanted cheekbones, the hawk nose. On the forehead was a golden, snarling mask inlaid with turquoise and jade in the shape of a jaguar. The mask was split down its centre, broken almost in two.

We gazed at that ancient warrior who had slept in stillness through the centuries between his world and ours. Then Juan broke the spell with grating words that echoed in the vault.

"At last I've come to see you, old sinner!" He barked a quick laugh. "You tried to kill me, but you failed. You're the one who's dead!"

It was shocking as blasphemy; I heard the Indians mutter and stir. Quickly I kicked the rock back on its hinge; it thudded, closed the tomb. I shouldered through and led the way up the tunnel again, out to the open sky.

It was mauve dusk when we came out. "We'll eat now," I said, ignoring Juan's last speech. "And then we'll take the camera and flash bulbs and get all the photos we can. We'll work all night if we have to; the usual routine, labelling, packing, and so forth."

"Good." Juan spoke normally again. "The sooner we're out of here, the better. But I intend to guard this hole," he said,

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" I don't want those fools looting the grave. I'll get a gun now and come back. If you'll please bring me tortillas and beans? "

I didn't want to argue, he could be right in protecting the vault. And I thought it wise for him to keep away from the villagers. We came down to our tent; Juan snatched a rifle, loaded it rapidly, and went out again. I saw the Indians light their evening fire at the jungle's edge and spread their mats.

While the meal was heating on the spirit-stove I packed the gear we would need. I sat sipping a drink, and had just finished writing up the day's report when I heard yelling outside.

I rushed out of the tent. The Indians were in turmoil, darting among the boles of the trees. As I ran, I saw a man jump high to grasp a branch and pull himself to safety as a streak of mottled gold and night shot under him with raking claws. The beautiful cat turned; its yellow eyes glittered as it flattened itself to spring.

Juan's rifle cracked. The animal fell limp.

He was there before me, spurning the creature with his toe. " A jaguar." Juan frowned. " Too many damned jaguars around here: in the jungle, on the pyramid, in the tomb. I loathe jaguars! " He turned to Dias. " Hey, you! " he continued in Spanish. " You want this beast? Take it; it's the emblem of your whole lousy tribe."

Naturally, Dias didn't understand him.

" Leave it for them," I said. " If they don't eat the meat, they could at least use the pelt."

" I have a better idea." Juan smiled mischievously. He heaved the warm carcass on his back and started to the pyramid. The Indians followed a pace or two, then they stood watching as he climbed to the top and cast the animal down beside the ruined temple. He spread his arms towards the warm night constellations; then laughed and came down to the platform.

" Don't forget my supper! " he called.

I pacified the Indians as best I could. They went back to their fire with expressionless faces, so I couldn't tell what they were thinking. But they were docile enough.

I joined Juan and we ate together up there on the ledge.

" That was a hell of a trick," I said. " What's got into you? "

" I hate them; I despise them! They're a sneaking, treacherous—" Juan checked himself. " Strange," he said after a pause, " I've never felt like this before. I suppose it's because they are so close to my people, and yet they've sunk so low. Forgive me," he apologised. " I'll try to watch myself."

We built our peace again. The Indians below were singing in soft falsetto voices, a wailing chant that went on and on and lost itself like haze in the purple night. We had to interrupt them a

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moment when we fetched our equipment, and I asked for a helper.

Dias himself volunteered.

It was eerie going from the dark outside to the black within. A night bird screeched as we entered the tunnel. But we were soon busy measuring, photographing, making notes from the entrance right down to the antechamber. After I had photographed the carvings, I risked my neck on the basalt rock to get an exact rubbing of it. Then we opened the tomb again.

We lowered a rope, using Dias as anchor man. I was barely able to squeeze through the gap, but it was easy for Juan. The cacique pulled the rope up again. We called to him to settle down and wait, and he began to sing softly to himself that same thin, fluting chant.

We set an oil lamp in a corner. I took my photographs from all angles, treading carefully so as not to disturb the objects that were shrouded in the sifted, velvet dust.

We found unexpectedly rich treasure. The body was wrapped in a cloak of hummingbirds' feathers; I listed golden amulets, lip ornaments, earrings, mosaics of polished blue jade, a little red clay dog, a bone flute and a reed pipe, a tobacco gourd, shells on silver strings, parched corn in a beaded pouch. And the magnificent mask. We lifted it and saw that the skull beneath was broken by a heavy blow. So the old warrior had died fighting.

"We'll come again next winter and do a proper job," I said. "Believe it or not, I really am anxious to get back for that religious ceremony in the Oaxaca mountains."

"It's fascinating," said Juan, "how some Indians drug themselves for their religion. This tribe we're going to visit uses an intoxicant species of mushroom. The vision it induces, they say, is even more wonderful than that from mescalin. Notice I said vision in the singular. All the eaters are supposed to share the same vision; they imagine they're in an identical setting, although each man appears in a different part of it."

"All in the same setting? That could lead to complications, if it's true."

Juan smiled. "That's what I want to find out. So let's not stay here too long."

I yawned. "I'm tired; it must be almost morning. We'll knock off for a minute." I brought out my pipe.

"Damn," Juan said, "I'm out of tobacco. I'll have to use yours."

As he reached across the warrior's body, his hand knocked the ancient tobacco gourd. Shaggy cut leaf spilt out, and I sniffed the ghost of a resinous incense smell.

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" Save it," Juan said to me. He addressed the figure between us. " Venerable sir, will you do us the kindness of permitting a pinch of your tobacco? I'd be glad if you would join us."

I began to protest, but Juan laughed. " Look, the gourd is full. Let's both try the brand the old boy smoked."

I was curious, and I had to admit there was enough to make no difference to the Museum if we removed a gramme. It was queer to sit in the owner's presence and use his tobacco, cured hundreds of years ago. I filled my pipe. The stuff was brittle, but cut thicker than ours. It must have been a very fleshy leaf. Juan peppered it into a cigarette paper and struck a match.

" Thank you," he said gravely to the skull.

Smoke from my pipe curled blue, the copal incense smell grew stronger. I sucked the stem, sighed, and knew how tired I was. The lamp threw heavy shadows, the monotony of Dias' singing was the only sound in the vault.

I began to doze; but I didn't want to fall asleep so I forced my eyelids open.

It was so dark that I could barely see. The incense was suffocating. As my eyes grew acclimatised, I perceived that I was in a small room, the walls caked black with blood, and through the door the sky was pre-dawn grey. I stood before the grotesque statue of a god—Tonatiuh, the Sun God, with red stones burning in his eyes—and prayed. Then I stalked to the edge of the stairs at the pyramid's summit. Acolytes with long black matted hair stood on either hand, the greasy smoke of incense writhed upwards.

I looked down and saw the cubed houses of the city gleaming pale in the mist, lapped by the hungry forest. Drums pulsed slowly. Below, by the skull-racks piled with their hellish dice, the multitudes of my congregation waited with upturned faces, writhing like snakes in a pit, breathing and stirring.

There were no lights.

Wind was cool on my naked body as I lifted my arms to the morning star, Lord of the House of Dawn. I recognised it as the planet Venus, and I prayed passionately that Father Sun would fight his sacred war and rise again in glory to grant us new life. My assistant black-draped priests scanned the heavens anxiously. For five days my people had waited with fasting and lamentation; they had shattered their household goods and extinguished their fires, forced their exhausted children to stay awake for fear that in this menacing time they should fall asleep and turn into rats.

The drummers pounded a faster beat, silver music of the flutes trilled out, and the procession started up the stairs. Conch shells

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sounded, musicians rattled the tepontzli, the two-tongued drums. The warriors came with flaunting insignia, crested with plumes of parrot and macaw, turquoise-and-feathered shields in the milky light, garlanded with flowers. They climbed, stamping a rhythmic dance on the stairs.

They reached the platform halfway up and filed out on the terraces. They led the captive forward, and took the flute from his hand, the mantle from his shoulders. He waited alone on the platform, a lithe young man wearing a breech clout; an enemy taken in battle, the bravest of their clan. Here was a sacrifice worthy of the Sun.

They gave him a buckler of straw and a small wooden club.

Then the chief of my warriors stepped forth. His servants lifted the plumed panache from his head and took his great feathered cloak. He wore a quilted suit of cotton armour, spotted like a jaguar. The golden jaguar mask covered his forehead; in his right hand was a two-edged sword toothed with obsidian, and on his left arm he bore a shield crusted with gold and jade.

The drums fell silent; the rattles ceased. The opponents faced each other and in profound solemnity the fight began.

They moved slowly round each other, threatening with their weapons. The captive danced suddenly, and the warrior's sword swept down. But the young man was too quick. The sword lashed out again; up, down, sideways; but the captive had a serpent's wings on his heels, for he was unscathed. He feinted, the warrior threw up his shield. The captive laughed aloud in insolence and hurled his buckler away. The warrior cut a mighty swath at the victim's knees; but that son of a dog sprang high into the air and brought his club, two-handed, down upon the gold-masked head. The crack was like the breaking of dry bamboo stalks.

A moan rose from round the pyramid as the jaguar chief fell. Deep in the jungle, a malevolent bird shrieked. The young man stooped to pick up the golden mask and with his toe spurned the warrior's body off the rim of the platform.

I knew with death in my heart that even though Lord Sun should rise again he would lessen the continuance of my people.

With wailing, the ritual went on. Maidens twined orchids in the captive's hair, the deep-toned drums boomed out again and the flutes took up their chant as the victim climbed alone to where I waited. My priests blew incense towards Father Sun, and darkness faded in pellucid light. The young man stood before me, rejoicing in the triumph of his coming sacrifice. I saw with no surprise that it was Juan. He turned his face to the mourning city and flicked the jaguar mask far out into the air.

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The acolytes seized Juan, they stretched his arms above his head and held his ankles down so that he was arched across the altar stone.

Lord Sun's arrows crimsoned the sky. I flung back from my shoulders my matted mane of hair. From my shredded ear lobe I plucked a sharp cactus spine and thrust it through my cheek, piercing my tongue. The Priest of the Left Hand presented the sacrificial basin at my side. The Priest of the Right Hand held the knife ready. It was a black obsidian knife, its handle worked in mosaic in the form of a leaping jaguar with stone-green eyes.

I reached for the blade.

I was hurled back, my head struck the wall . . .

I opened my eyes and saw the lamp was guttering low. The fragrance of copal resin lingered in the air, with the fluting voice of Dias still singing. I saw Juan sprawled in sleep beside the ancient corpse. I stuffed the cold pipe in my pocket and called to him.

Then I saw that Juan's shirt was open, and in his chest glittered the stone eyes of a leaping jaguar that was the handle of a knife. It was, I swear, the knife I had reached for a moment ago. I looked, and saw that Juan's chest was carved wide and deep; but his shirt was spotless, there was no blood.

I called repeatedly to Dias to rouse him from his hypnotic chant. He was emphatic that nobody went past him, in or out of the vault.

Now I have read over the list I made of the articles in the tomb; there was no knife among them.

So I wait for the police, and the Indians sit a little way off, watching me, while I wonder how I eviscerated my friend yet left no drop of blood.

Dias has just come to me, and by his gestures he indicates that I should follow him. He keeps pointing to the top of the pyramid, smiling; I think there is something he wants me to see. I wish I could understand him. He has taken me gently by the arms to lead me, but I've shown him that I want to finish writing.

I've brought out my pipe, and I see there's still the ancient tobacco in the bowl. Now I'm frightened. I wonder—if I smoke it, will I dream again and find out who killed Juan?

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DESSERT-ATION

Murder is always a mistake; one should never do anything that one cannot talk about after dinner.

OSCAR WILDE

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FEAR IS THE

by

Alistair MacLean

I was on the run, having shot my way out of a Florida court, taking with me as hostage Mary Ruthven, heiress to a fortune. Charges against me were too numerous to count; by the end of the day I heard I was wanted for murder, too—there was a five thousand dollar reward for me, John Montague Talbot.

An alert went out; patrol cars, road blocks, the lot . . .

It wasn't the police who finally caught up with me, but Jablonsky, a big, powerful character who had tailed us to a motel. He was an expert at the game; I handed over my gun without being told. But Jablonsky seemed in no hurry to call the police. While he and the girl argued about it I took a chance and jumped him . . .

I NEVER got there. I'd wondered what he could do with his right hand and now I found out. With his right hand he could change his gun over to his left, whip a sap from his coat pocket, and hit a diving man over the head faster than anyone I'd ever known. He'd been expecting something like that from me, sure: but it was still quite a performance.

By and by someone threw cold water over me and I sat up with a groan and tried to clutch the top of my head. With both hands tied behind your back, it's impossible to clutch the top of your head. So I let my head look after itself, climbed shakily to my feet by pressing my bound hands against the wall at my back, and staggered over to the nearest chair.

I looked at Jablonsky, and he was busy screwing a perforated black metal cylinder on to the barrel of the Mauser. He looked at me and smiled. He was always smiling.

"I might not be so lucky a second time," he said diffidently.

I scowled.

"Miss Ruthven," he went on. "I'm going to use the phone."

"Why tell me?" She was picking up my manners and they didn't suit her at all.

"Because I'm going to phone your father. I want you to tell me his number. It won't be listed."

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KEY

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"Why should you phone him?"

"There's a reward out for our friend here," Jablonsky replied obliquely. "It was announced right after the news of Constable Donnelly's death. The state will pay five thousand dollars for any information leading to the arrest of John Montague Talbot." He smiled at me. "Montague? Well, I believe I prefer it to Cecil."

"Get on with it," I said coldly.

"They must have declared open season on Mr. Talbot," Jablonsky said. "They want him dead or alive and don't much care which. General Ruthven has offered to double the reward."

"Ten thousand dollars?" I asked.

"At the last count old man Ruthven was worth two hundred and eighty-five million dollars. He might," Jablonsky agreed judiciously, "have offered more. A total of fifteen thousand. What's fifteen thousand?"

"Go on," said the girl. There was a glint in those grey eyes.

"He can have his daughter back for fifty thousand bucks," Jablonsky said coolly.

"Fifty thousand!" Her voice was almost a gasp. If she'd been as poor as me, she would have gasped.

Jablonsky nodded. "Plus, of course, the fifteen thousand I'll collect for turning Talbot in as any good citizen should."

"Who are you?" the girl demanded shakily. She didn't look as if she could take much more of this. "What are you?"

"I'm a guy that wants, let me see—yes, sixty-five thousand."

"But this is blackmail!"

"Blackmail?" Jablonsky lifted an eyebrow. "You want to read up some law, girlie. In its strict legal sense, blackmail is hush-money—a tribute paid to buy immunity, money extorted by the threat of telling everyone what a heel the blackmailee is. Has General Ruthven anything to hide? I doubt it. Or you might just say that blackmail is demanding money with menaces. Where's the menace? I'm not menacing you. If your old man doesn't pay up, I'll just walk away and leave you to Talbot here. Who can blame me? I'm scared of Talbot. He's a killer."

"But—but then you would get nothing."

"I'd get it," Jablonsky said comfortably. I tried to imagine this character flustered or unsure of himself: it was impossible. "Only a threat. Your old man wouldn't dare to gamble that I wouldn't do it. He'll pay, all right."

"Kidnapping is an offence—" the girl began slowly.

"So it is," Jablonsky agreed cheerfully. "The hot chair or the gas chamber. That's for Talbot. He kidnapped you. All I'm doing is talking about leaving you. No kidnapping there." His voice hardened. "What hotel is your father staying at?"

"He's not at any hotel." Her voice was flat and toneless and she'd given up. "He's out on the X 13."

"Talk sense," Jablonsky said curtly.

"X 13 is one of his oil-rigs. It's out in the gulf, twelve, maybe fifteen miles from here. I don't know."

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"Out in the gulf. You mean one of those floating platforms for drilling for oil?"

"Yes. Dad's got one right down near Key West. And they don't float, they—oh, what does it matter. He's on X 13."

"No phone, eh?"

"Yes. A submarine cable. And a radio from the shore office."

"The phone—just ask the operator for the X 13, eh?"

She nodded without speaking, and Jablonsky crossed to the phone, asked the motel switchboard girl for the exchange, asked for the X 13, and stood there waiting, whistling in a peculiarly tuneless fashion until a sudden thought occurred to him.

"How does your father get to and fro from the rig?"

"By boat or helicopter. Usually helicopter."

"What hotel does he stay at when he's ashore?"

"Not an hotel. Just an ordinary family house. He's got a place about two miles south of Marble Springs."

Jablonsky nodded and resumed his whistling. His eyes appeared to be gazing at a remote point in the ceiling, but when I moved a foot a couple of experimental inches those eyes were on me instantly. Mary Ruthven had seen both the movement of my foot and the immediate switch of Jablonsky's glance, and for a fleeting moment her eyes caught mine. There was no sympathy in them, but I stretched my imagination a little and thought I detected a flicker of fellow-feeling. We were in the same boat and it was sinking fast.

The whistling stopped. I could hear an indistinguishable crackle of sound, then Jablonsky said, "I want to speak to General Ruthven. Urgently. It's about— Say that again? I see. I see."

He depressed the receiver and looked at Mary Ruthven.

"Your father left the X 13 at four, and hasn't returned. They say he won't be back until they've found you. Blood, it would appear, is thicker than oil. Makes things all the easier for me."

He got through to the new number he'd been given from the oil-rig and asked for the general again. He got him almost at once and didn't waste a word. "General Blair Ruthven? . . . I've got news for you, General. Good news and bad. I've got your daughter here. That's the good news. The bad news is that it'll cost you fifty thousand bucks to get her back."

Jablonsky broke off and listened, spinning the Mauser gently round his forefinger, smiling as always. "No, General, I am not John Talbot. But Talbot's with me right now. I've persuaded him that keeping father and daughter apart any longer is downright inhuman. You know Talbot, General, or you know of him. It took a lot of persuading. Fifty thousand bucks' worth."

The smile suddenly vanished from Jablonsky's face, leaving it bleak and cold and hard. The real Jablonsky. His voice, when he spoke, was softer and deeper than ever and gently reproving as to an erring child.

"General, do you know what? I just heard a funny little click. The sort of funny little click you hear on a line when some smart-

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alec nosey picks up an extension and starts flapping his ears or when somebody cuts in a tape recorder. I don't want any eavesdroppers. No records of private conversations. Neither do you. Not if you ever want to see your daughter again. Ah, that's better.

"And General, don't get any funny ideas about telling someone to get through to the cops on another line to ask them to trace this call. We'll be gone from wherever we are in exactly two minutes from now. What's your answer? Make it quickly."

Another brief pause, then Jablonsky laughed pleasantly.

"Threatening you, General? Blackmail, General? Kidnapping, General? Don't be so silly, General. There's no law that says that a man can't run away from a vicious killer, is there? Even if that vicious killer happens to have a kidnappee with him. I'll just walk out and leave them together. Tell me, are you bargaining for your daughter's life, General? Is she worth no more to you than less than one-fiftieth of one per cent of all you own? Is that all her value to a doting father? She's listening in to all this, General. I wonder what she must think of you, eh? Sure, sure you can speak to her." He beckoned to the girl, who ran across the room and snatched the phone from his hand.

"Daddy? Daddy! Yes, yes, it's me, of course it's me. Oh, Daddy, I never thought—"

"Right, that'll do." Jablonsky laid his big square brown hand across the mouthpiece and took the phone from her. "Satisfied, General Blair? The genuine article, eh?" There was a short silence, then Jablonsky smiled broadly. "Thank you, General Blair. I'm not worrying about any guarantee. The word of General Ruthven has always been guarantee enough."

He listened a moment, and when he spoke again the sardonic glint in his eye as he looked at Mary Ruthven gave the lie to the sincerity in his voice. "Besides, you know quite well that if you welshed on that money and had a house full of cops, your daughter would never speak to you again . . . No need to worry about my not coming. There's every reason why I should. Fifty thousand, to be exact." He hung up. "On your feet, Talbot. We've an appointment with high society."

"Yes." I sat where I was. "And then you turn me over to the law and collect your fifteen thousand?"

"Sure. Why not?"

"I could give you twenty thousand reasons."

"Yeah?" He looked at me speculatively. "Got 'em on you?"

"Don't be stupid. Give me a week, or perhaps—"

"Bird-in-the-hand Jablonsky, pal, that's me. Get going."

He cut my bonds and we went out through the garage. Jablonsky had a hand on the girl's wrist and a gun about thirty inches from my back. I couldn't see it, but I didn't have to. I knew it was there.

Night had come. The wind was rising from the north-west, and it carried with it the wild harsh smell of the sea and a cold slanting rain that spattered loudly against the rustling dripping fronds of the palms and bounced at an angle off the asphalt pavement at our

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feet. It was less than a hundred yards to where Jablonsky had left his car, but that hundred yards made us good and wet. The car park, in that rain, was deserted, but even so Jablonsky had backed his car into the darkest corner. He would. He opened both offside doors, then went and stood by the rear door.

"You first, lady. Other side. You're driving, Talbot." He banged my door shut as I got in behind the wheel, slid into the back seat, and closed his own door. He let me feel the Mauser, hard, against the back of my neck in case my memory was failing me. "Turn south on the highway."

I managed to press the proper buttons, eased through the deserted motel courtyard, and turned right. Jablonsky said to the girl, "Your old man's place is just off the main highway?"

"Yes."

"We'll go straight through the town. I'm figuring the same way as Talbot figured when he came to the La Contessa—no one will be looking for him within fifty miles of Marble Springs."

We drove through the town in silence. The roads were almost deserted and there weren't half a dozen pedestrians to be seen. I caught the red both times at the only two sets of traffic lights in Marble Springs, and both times the Mauser came to rest on the back of my head. By and by we were clear of the town, with the rain sheeting down in a torrential cascade that drummed thunderously on the roof and hood of the car. It was like driving under a waterfall, and the windscreen-wipers weren't built for driving under waterfalls.

I had to slow down to twenty and even so I was all but blind whenever the headlights of an approaching car spread their whitely-diffused glare over the streaming glass of the windscreen, a blindness which became complete with the spraying wall of water that thudded solidly against screen and offside of the body as the approaching cars swept by with the sibilant whisper of wet rubber on wet roads and a bow-wave that a destroyer captain would have been proud to own.

Mary Ruthven peered into the alternating glare and gloom with her forehead pressed against the windscreen. She probably knew the road well, but she didn't know it tonight. A lorry growled by at the wrong moment and she almost missed the turning.

"There it is!" She grabbed my forearm so hard that the car skidded for a moment on to the shoulder of the road before I could bring it under control. I caught a glimpse through the rain of a dimly phosphorescent glow on the left and was fifty yards beyond before I stopped. The road was too narrow for a U-turn so I reversed, crawled up to the illuminated opening in first, and turned in slowly. I should have hated to turn in there quickly. As it was, I managed to pull up a few feet short of a six-barred white-painted metal gate that would have stopped a bulldozer.

The gate appeared to be at the end of an almost flat-roofed tunnel. On the left was a seven-foot high white limestone wall, maybe twenty feet long. On the right was a white lodge with an

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oak door and chintz-curtained windows looking out on to the tunnel. Lodge and wall were joined by a shallowly-curved roof. I couldn't see what the roof was made of. I wasn't interested in it anyway: I was too busy looking at the man who had come through the lodge door even before I had braked to a stop.

He was the dowager's dream of a chauffeur. He was a poem in maroon. The flaring Bedford cord breeches, the high-buttoned tunic, the gloves . . . even the peak of the cap were all of the same perfect shade. His cap was off. His hair wasn't maroon. It was thick and black and gleaming and parted on the right. He had a smooth tanned face and dark steady eyes set well apart—just like his shoulders. A poem, but no pansy. He was as big as I was, and a whole lot better looking.

Mary Ruthven had the window wound down, and the chauffeur bent to look at her, one sinewy brown hand resting on the edge of the door. When he saw who it was, the brown face broke into a wide white smile.

" It is you, Miss Mary." The voice was deep, educated, and unmistakably English. " The general has been worried stiff, Miss Mary. But he'll be all right now. I'll let them know right away." He half turned, wheeled, craned forward and peered into the back of the car. His body perceptibly stiffened.

" Yeah, it's a gun," Jablonsky said comfortably from the rear seat. " Just holding it, sonny—gets kinda uncomfortable sitting down with a gun in your hip pocket. Haven't you found that yourself? " I could see the slight bulge on the chauffeur's right hip. " Spoils the cut of the Little Lord Fauntleroy suit, don't it, though? " Jablonsky went on. "And don't get any funny ideas about using yours. The time for that's past. Besides you might hit Talbot. That's him behind the wheel. Fifteen thousand dollars on the hoof and I want to deliver him in prime condition."

" I don't know what you're talking about, sir." The chauffeur's face had darkened, his voice was barely civil. " I'll ring the house." He turned away, went into the small lobby behind the door, lifted a phone and pressed a button and, as he did so, the heavy gate swung open silently, smoothly, of its own accord.

" All we need now is a moat and a portcullis," Jablonsky murmured as we began to move forward. " Looks after his two hundred and eighty-five millions, does the old general. Electrified fences, patrols, dogs, the lot, eh, lady? "

She didn't answer. We were moving past a big four-car garage attached to the lodge. It was a carport type garage without doors and I could see two Rolls-Royces. There was also a Cadillac.

Jablonsky was speaking again. " Old Fancy-pants back there. The Limey. Where'd you pick that sissy up? "

" I'd like to see you say that to him without that gun in your hand," the girl said quietly. " He's been with us for three years now. Nine months ago three masked men crashed our car with only Kennerley and myself in it. They all carried guns. One's dead, the other two are still in prison."

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The asphalted drive was long, winding, and thickly wooded. Suddenly the trees receded, giving way to strategically placed clumps of palms and palmettos, and there, behind a stepped granite balustrade wall and a gravel terrace, lay the general's house.

Built as an ordinary family house, the girl had said. Built for a family of about fifty. It was enormous. It was an old white ante-bellum type house, so Colonial that it creaked, with a huge pillared two-storey porch, a curiously double-angled roof of a type I'd never seen before, and enough glass to keep an active window-cleaner in year-round employment. Over the entrance of the lower porch were two more lights, big oldfashioned coach lamps. Below the lamps stood the reception committee.

The butler came down the steps of the porch carrying a huge golf umbrella out into the heavy rain. He didn't look like any butler I'd ever seen. His coat was far too tight round his upper arms, shoulders, and chest in a fashion that used to be popular among prohibition gangsters and his face did nothing to dispel the impression. He looked first cousin to Valentino, Mary's bodyguard in the court-room. Or maybe even more closely related. He even had the same broken nose. The general had a weird taste in butlers, especially when you considered his choice of chauffeur.

But the butler seemed courteous enough. At least I thought he was, until he saw who it was behind the driving wheel and then he made a smart turn, went round the front of the car and escorted Mary Ruthven to the shelter of the porch where she ran forward and threw her arms round her father's neck.

Jablonsky and I had to make it alone. We got wet, but no one seemed worried.

By this time the girl had become disentangled from her father. I had a good look at him. He was an immensely tall old coot, thin but not too thin, in a silver-white linen suit. The colour of the suit was a perfect match for the hair. He had a long lean craggy Lincolnesque face, but just how craggy it was impossible to say for almost half of it was hidden behind a luxuriant white moustache and beard.

" Come in, gentlemen," he said courteously. I wondered if he included me among the three other men standing in the shadows in the porch. It seemed unlikely, but I went in all the same. I hadn't much option. Not only was Jablonsky's Mauser jammed into the small of my back, but another man who'd just stepped out of the shadows also carried a gun. We trooped across a huge, wide, chandelier-lit, tessellated-tile floored hall, down a broad passage and into a large room.

I'd been right about the room anyway. It was a library, it did have a blazing pine fire, and the slightly oily smell of fine leather-bound books mingled very pleasantly with the aroma of expensive cigars and a high class Scotch. The walls that weren't covered with bookshelves were panelled in polished elm. Chairs and settees were in dark gold leather, and the curtains of shot gold. A bronze-coloured carpet flowed over the floor from wall to wall.

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"Scotch, Mr.—ah—?" the general asked Jablonsky.

"Jablonsky. I don't mind, General. While I'm waiting."

"Waiting for what, Mr. Jablonsky?" General Ruthven had a quiet pleasant voice with very little inflection in it. With two hundred and eighty-five million bucks you don't have to shout to make yourself heard.

"Ain't you the little kidder, now?" Jablonsky was as quiet, as unruffled as the general. "For the little paper, General, with your name signed at the bottom. For the fifty thousand iron men."

"Of course." The general seemed faintly surprised that Jablonsky should think it necessary to remind him of the agreement. He crossed to the dressed-stone mantelpiece, pulled a yellow bank slip from under a paperweight. "I have it here, just the payee's name to be filled in." I thought a faint smile touched his mouth, but under all that foliage it was difficult to be sure. "And you needn't worry about my phoning the bank with instructions not to honour this cheque. Such is not my way of doing business."

"I know it's not, General."

"And my daughter is worth infinitely more to me than this. I must thank you, sir, for bringing her back."

"Yeah." Jablonsky took the cheque, glanced at it casually, then looked up at the general, a speculative glint in his eye.

"Your pen slipped, General," he drawled. "I asked for fifty thousand. You've got seventy thousand here."

"Correct." Ruthven inclined his head and glanced at me. "I had offered ten thousand dollars for information about this man here. I also feel that I'm morally bound to make good the five thousand offered by the authorities. It's so much easier to make out one lump sum cheque to one person, don't you agree?"

"And the extra five thousand?"

"For your trouble and the pleasure it will give me to hand this man over to the authorities personally."

"Your pleasure is my pleasure, General. I'll be on my way, then. Sure you can handle this fellow? He's tough, fast, tricky as they come."

"I have people who can handle him." It was plain that the general wasn't referring to the butler and another uniformed servant hovering in the background. He pressed a bell, and when some sort of footman came to the door, said, "Ask Mr. Vyland and Mr. Royale to come in, will you, Fletcher?"

"Why don't you ask them yourself, General?" To my way of thinking I was the central figure in that little group, but they hadn't even asked me to speak, so I thought it was time to say something.

I bent down to the bowl of artificial flowers on the table by the fire, and pulled up a fine-meshed microphone. "This room's wired. A hundred to one your friends have heard every word that's been said. For a millionaire and high society flier, Ruthven, you have some strange habits." I broke off and looked at the trio who had just come in. "And even stranger friends."

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Which wasn't quite an accurate statement. The first man in looked perfectly at home in that luxurious setting. He was of medium height, medium build, dressed in a perfectly-cut dinner-suit, and smoking a cigar as long as your arm. That was the expensive smell I'd picked up as soon as I had come into the library.

He was in his early fifties, with black hair touched by grey at the temples: his neat clipped moustache was jet black. His face was smooth and unlined and deeply sunburnt. He was Hollywood's ideal of a man to play the part of a top executive, smooth, urbane, and competent to a degree. It was only when he came closer and you saw the eyes and the set of the planes of his face that you realised that here was a toughness, both physical and mental, and a hardness that you would never see on a film set. A man to watch.

The second man was more offbeat. It was hard to put a finger on the quality that made him so. He was dressed in a soft grey flannel suit, white shirt, and grey tie of the same shade as the suit. He was slightly below medium height, broadly built, with a pale face, and smooth slicked hair almost the same colour as Mary Ruthven's. It wasn't until you looked again and again that you saw what made him offbeat. It wasn't anything he had; it was something he didn't have. He had the most expressionless face, the emptiest eyes, I had ever seen in any man.

Offbeat was no description for the man who brought up the rear. He belonged in that library the way Mozart would have belonged in a rock and roll club. He was only twenty-one or two, tall, skinny, with a dead white face and coal-black eyes. The eyes were never still: they moved restlessly from side to side as if it hurt them to be still, flickering from one face to another like a will o' the wisp on an autumn evening. I didn't notice what he wore, all I saw was his face—the face of a hophead, an advanced dope addict.

"Come in, Mr. Vyland." The general was speaking to the man with the cigar, and I wished for the tenth time that old Ruthven's expression wasn't so hard to read. He nodded in my direction. "This is Talbot, the wanted man. And this is Mr. Jablonsky, the man who brought him back."

"Glad to meet you, Mr. Jablonsky." Vyland smiled in a friendly fashion and put his hand out. "I'm the general's chief production engineer." Sure, he was the general's chief production engineer, that made me President of the United States. Vyland nodded at the man in the grey suit. "This is Mr. Royale, Mr. Jablonsky."

"Mr. Jablonsky! Mr. Jablonsky!" The words weren't spoken, they were hissed by the tall thin boy with the staring eyes. His hand dived under the lapel of his jacket, and I had to admit he was fast. The gun trembled in his hand. He swore, three unprintable words in succession, and the eyes were glazed and mad. "I've waited two long years for this, you— Damn you, Royale! Why did—?"

"There's a young lady here, Larry." I could have sworn that

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Royale's hand hadn't reached under his coat, or for his hip pocket, but there had been no mistaking the flash of dulled metal in his hand, the sharp crack of the barrel on Larry's wrist, and the clatter of the boy's gun bouncing off a brass-topped table. As an example of sleight-of-hand conjuring, I'd never seen anything to beat it.

"We know Mr. Jablonsky," Royale was continuing. His voice was curiously musical and soothing and soft. "At least, Larry and I know him. Don't we, Larry? Larry did six months once on a narcotics charge. It was Jablonsky that sent him up."

"Jablonsky sent—?" the general began.

"Jablonsky." Royale smiled and nodded at the big man. "Detective-Lieutenant Herman Jablonsky, New York Homicide."

It was one of those silences. It went on and on and on. Pregnant, they call it. It didn't worry me much, I was for the high jump anyway. It was the general who spoke first, and his voice and face were stiff and cold as he looked at the man in the dinner-suit.

"What is the explanation of this outrageous conduct, Vyland?" he demanded. "You bring into this house a man who is not only a narcotics addict and carries a gun, but who has also served a prison sentence. As for the presence of a police officer—"

"Relax, General. You can drop the front." It was Royale who spoke, his voice quiet and soothing as before and curiously devoid of any trace of insolence. "I wasn't quite accurate. Ex-Detective-Lieutenant, I should have said. Brightest boy in the bureau in his day, first narcotics, then homicide, more arrests and more convictions for arrests than any other police officer in the eastern states. But your foot slipped, didn't it, Jablonsky?"

Jablonsky said nothing and his face showed nothing, but it didn't mean he wasn't thinking plenty. My face showed nothing, but I was thinking plenty. I was thinking how I could try to get away. The servants had vanished at a wave of the hand from the general and, for the moment, everyone seemed to have lost interest in me. I turned my head casually. I was wrong, there was someone who hadn't lost interest in me.

Valentino, my court-room acquaintance, was standing in the passage just outside the open door, and the interest he was taking in me more than made up for the lack of interest in the library. I was pleased to see that he was carrying his right arm in a sling. His left thumb was hooked in the side pocket of his coat, and although he might have had a big thumb, it wasn't big enough to make all that bulge in his pocket. He would just love to see me trying to get away.

"Jablonsky here was the central figure in the biggest police scandal to hit New York since the war," Royale was saying. "All of a sudden there were a lot of murders—important murders—in his parish, and Jablonsky boobed on the lot. Everyone knew a protection gang was behind the killings. Everybody except Jablonsky. All Jablonsky knew was that he was getting ten grand a stiff to look in every direction but the right one. But he had even

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more enemies inside the force than outside, and they nailed him. Eighteen months ago it was, and he had the headlines to himself for an entire week. Don't you remember, Mr. Vyland?"

"Now I do," Vyland nodded. "Sixty thousand tucked away, they never laid a finger on a cent. Three years he got, wasn't it?"

"And out in eighteen months," Royale finished. "Jumped the wall, Jablonsky?"

"Good conduct remission," Jablonsky said calmly. "A respectable citizen again. Which is more than could be said for you, Royale. You employing this man, General?"

"I fail to see—"

"Because if you are, it'll cost you a hundred bucks more than you think. A hundred bucks is the price Royale usually charges his employers for a wreath for his victims. A very fancy wreath. Or has the price gone up, Royale? And who are you putting the finger on this time?"

Nobody said anything. Jablonsky had the floor.

"Royale here is listed in the police files of half the states in the Union, General. Nobody's ever pinned anything on him yet, but they know all about him. No. 1 remover in the United States—not furniture but people. He charges high, but he's good and there's never any comeback. A freelance, and his services are in terrific demand by all sorts of people you'd never dream of, not only because he never fails to give satisfaction but also because of the fact that it's a point of Royale's code that he'll never touch a man who has employed him. An awful lot of people sleep an awful lot easier, General, just because they know they're on Royale's list of untouchables." Jablonsky rubbed a bristly chin with a hand the size of a shovel. "I wonder who he could be after this time, General? Could it even be yourself, do you think?"

For the first time the general registered emotion. Not even the beard and moustache could hide a narrowing of the eyes, a tightening of the lips, and a slight draining of colour from the cheeks.

"Jablonsky's just shooting off the top of his mouth," Vyland interjected smoothly. "Let's get them into another room, General. We must talk."

Ruthven nodded, his face still pale, and Vyland glanced at Royale. Royale smiled, and said without inflection, "All right, you two, out. Leave that gun there, Jablonsky."

"And if I don't?"

"You haven't cashed that cheque yet," Royale said obliquely. They'd been listening, all right.

Jablonsky put his gun on the table. Royale himself didn't have a gun in his hand. With the speed he could move at, it would have been quite superfluous anyway. The hophead, Larry, came up behind me and dug his pistol barrel in my kidney with a force that made me grunt in pain.

Nobody said anything, so I said, "Do that again, hophead, and it'll take a dentist a whole day to repair your face." So he did it again, twice, and when I swung round he was too quick for me

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and caught me with the barrel of his gun high up on the face and raked the sight down my cheek.

Then he stood off, four feet away, gun pointed at my lower stomach and those crazy eyes jumping all over the place, a wicked smile on his face, inviting me to jump him. I mopped some of the blood off my face and turned and went out of the door.

Valentino was waiting for me, gun in hand and heavy boots on his feet, and by the time Royale came leisurely out of the library, closed the door behind him and stopped Valentino with a single word, I couldn't walk. There's nothing wrong with my thigh, it's carried me around for years, but it's not made of oak and Valentino wore toe-plates on his boots. It just wasn't my lucky night. Jablonsky helped me off the floor and into an adjacent room.

I stopped at the doorway, looked back at the grinning Valentino and at Larry, and I wrote them both down in my little black book.

We spent perhaps ten minutes in that room, Jablonsky and I sitting, the hophead pacing up and down with the gun in his hand and hoping I would twitch an eyebrow, Royale leaning negligently against a table, nobody saying anything, until by and by the butler came in and said the general wanted to see us. We all trooped out again. Valentino was still there, but I made it safely to the library. Maybe he'd hurt his toe, but I knew it wasn't that: Royale had told him once to lay off, and just once would be all that Royale would have to tell anybody anything.

A far from subtle change had taken place in the atmosphere since we'd left. The girl was still sitting on a stool by the fire, head bent and the flickering light gleaming off her wheat-coloured hair, but Vyland and the general seemed easy and relaxed and confident.

A couple of newspapers were lying on the library table and I wondered sourly if those, with their big black banner headlines,

WANTED KILLER SLAYS CONSTABLE, WOUNDS SHERIFF

and the far from flattering pictures of myself had anything to do with their confidence.

To emphasise the change in atmosphere, a footman came in with a tray of glasses, decanter, and soda syphon. He was a young man, but moved with a peculiarly stiff leaden-footed gait and he laid the tray down on the table with so laborious a difficulty that you could almost hear his joints creak. His colour didn't look too good either. I looked away, glanced at him again, and then indifferently away once more, hoping that the knowledge of what I suddenly knew didn't show in my face.

They'd read all the right books on etiquette: the footman and the butler knew exactly what to do. The footman brought in the drinks, the butler carried them round. He gave a sherry to the girl, whisky to each of the four men—hophead was pointedly bypassed—and planted himself in front of me.

My gaze travelled from his hairy wrists to his broken nose to the general in the background. The general nodded, so I looked back at the silver tray again. Pride said no ; the magnificent

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aroma of the amber liquid poured from that triangular dimpled bottle said yes ; but pride carried the heavy handicap of my hunger, soaked clothes, and the beating I'd just had, and the aroma won.

I took the glass and eyed the general over the rim. " A last drink for the condemned man, eh, General? "

" Not condemned yet." He lifted his glass. " Your health, Talbot."

" Very witty," I sneered.

" Your health," he repeated. " You're not condemned; maybe you'll never be condemned. I've a proposition to put to you."

I lowered myself carefully into a chair. Valentino's boot must have mangled up one of the nerves in my leg, a thigh muscle was jumping uncontrollably. I waved at the papers lying on the table.

" I take it you've read those, General. You know all about what happened today, all about my record. What kind of proposition can a man like you possibly have to put to a man like me? "

" A very attractive one." I imagined I saw a slight flush of red touch the high cheekbones, but he spoke steadily enough. " In exchange for a little service I wish you to perform for me, I offer you your life."

" A fair offer. And the nature of this little service, General? "

" I am not at liberty to tell you at present. In about, perhaps—thirty-six hours, you would say, Vyland? "

" We should hear by then," Vyland agreed. He was less and less like an engineer every time I looked at him. He took a puff at his cigar and looked at me. " You agree to the general's proposition? "

" What else can I do? And after the job, whatever it is? "

" You will be provided with papers and passport and sent to a certain South American country where you will have nothing to fear," the general answered. " I have the connections." Like hell I would be given papers and a trip to South America: I would be given a pair of concrete socks and a vertical trip to the bottom of the Gulf of Mexico.

" And if I don't agree, then of course—"

" If you don't agree, then they will be all overcome by a high sense of civic responsibility and turn you over to the cops," Jablonsky interrupted sardonically. " The whole set-up stinks to high heaven. Why should the general want you?—he can hire practically any man in the nation. Why, especially, should he hire a killer on the lam? What earthly use can you be to him? Why should he help a wanted murderer to evade justice? " He sipped his drink thoughtfully. " General Blair Ruthven, the moral pillar of New England society, best known and highest minded do-gooder in the States. It stinks. You're paddling in some dark and dirty water, General. Very dark, very dirty. And paddling right up to your neck. Lord knows what stakes *you* must be playing for. They must be fantastic." He shook his head. " This I would never have believed."

" I have never willingly or knowingly done a dishonest thing in my life," the general said steadily.

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For a few seconds Jablonsky was silent, then said suddenly, "Well, thanks for the drink, General. Don't forget to sup with a long spoon. I'll take my hat and my cheque and be on my way. The Jablonsky retirement fund is in your debt."

I didn't see who made the signal. Probably it came from Vyland. Again I didn't see how the gun got into Royale's hand. But I saw it there. So did Jablonsky. It was a tiny gun, a very flat automatic with a snub barrel, even smaller than the Lilliput the sheriff had taken off me. But Royale probably had the eye and the aim of a squirrel-hunter, and it was all he needed: a great big hole in the heart from a heavy Colt makes you no deader than a tiny little hole from a .22.

Jablonsky looked thoughtfully at the gun. "You would rather I stayed, General?"

"Put that damn gun away," the general snapped. "Jablonsky's on our side. At least, I hope he's going to be. Yes, I'd rather you stayed. But no one's going to make you if you don't want to."

"And what's going to make me want to?" Jablonsky inquired of the company at large. "Could it be that the general, who has never willingly done a dishonest thing in his life, is planning to hold up payment on that cheque? Or maybe just planning to tear it up altogether?"

It didn't need the general's suddenly-averted eyes to confirm Jablonsky's guess. Vyland cut in smoothly, "It'll be for two days, Jablonsky, three at most. After all, you are getting a great deal of money for very little. All we're asking you to do is to ride hard on Talbot here until he's done what we want him to do."

Jablonsky nodded slowly. "I see. Royale here wouldn't stoop to bodyguarding—he takes care of people in a rather more permanent way. The thug out in the passage there, the butler, our little friend Larry here—Talbot could eat 'em all before breakfast. You must need Talbot pretty badly, eh?"

"We require him," Vyland said smoothly. "And from what we've learnt from Miss Ruthven—and from what Royale knows of you—you can hold him. And your money's safe."

"Uh-huh. And tell me, am I a prisoner looking after a prisoner, or am I free to come and go?"

"You heard what the general said," Vyland answered. "You're a free agent. But if you do go out, make sure he's locked up or tied so that he can't break for it."

"Seventy thousand bucks' worth of guarding, eh?" Jablonsky said grimly. "He's safe as the gold in Fort Knox." I caught Royale and Vyland exchanging a brief flicker of a glance as Jablonsky went on, "But I'm kind of worried about that seventy thousand. I mean, if someone finds out Talbot is here, I won't get the seventy thousand. All I'll get, with my record, is ten years for obstructing the course of justice." He looked speculatively at Vyland and the general, and went on softly, "What guarantee have I that no one in this house will talk?"

"No one will talk," Vyland said flatly.

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"The chauffeur lives in the lodge, doesn't he?" Jablonsky asked obliquely.

"Yes, he does." Vyland spoke softly, thoughtfully. "It might be a good idea to get rid of—"

"No!" the girl interrupted violently. She'd jumped to her feet, fists clenched by her side.

"In no circumstances," General Ruthven said quietly. "Kennerley remains. We are too much in his debt."

Vyland's dark eyes narrowed for a moment and he looked at the general. But it was the girl who answered the unspoken query.

"Simon won't talk," she said tonelessly. She moved towards the door. "I'll go to see him."

"Simon, eh?" Vyland scraped a thumbnail against the corner of his moustache, and looked at her appraisingly. "Simon Kennerley, chauffeur and general handyman."

She retraced a few steps, stopped in front of Vyland, and looked at him steadily, tiredly. You could just see the fifteen generations stretching back to the *Mayflower* and every one of the two hundred and eighty-five million bucks was showing. She said distinctly, "I think you are the most utterly hateful man I have ever known," and walked out, closing the door behind her.

"My daughter is overwrought," the general said hastily.

"Forget it, General." Vyland's voice was as urbane as ever, but he looked a bit overwrought himself. "Royale, you might show Jablonsky and Talbot their quarters for tonight. East end of the new wing—the rooms are being got ready now."

Royale nodded, but Jablonsky held up his hand. "This job Talbot is going to do for you—is it in this house?"

General Ruthven glanced at Vyland, then shook his head.

"Then where?" Jablonsky demanded. "If this guy is taken out of here and anybody within a hundred miles spots him, we've had it. Particularly, it would be good-bye to my money. I think I'm entitled to a little reassurance on this point, General."

Again the swift interchange of looks between the general and Vyland, again the latter's all but imperceptible nod.

"I think we can tell you that," the general said. "The job's on the X 13, my oil-rig." He smiled faintly. "Fifteen miles from here and well out in the gulf. No passer-by to see him there."

Jablonsky nodded, as though for the moment satisfied, and said no more. I stared at the ground. I didn't dare to look up.

Royale said softly, "Let's be on our way."

I finished my drink and got up. The heavy library door opened outwards into the passage and Royale, gun in hand, stood to one side to let me pass through first. He should have known better. People thought my limp slowed me up, but people were wrong.

Valentino had disappeared. I went through the doorway, slowed up and moved to one side round the edge of the door as if I were waiting for Royale to catch up and show me where to go, then whirled round and smashed the sole of my right foot against the door with all the speed and power I could muster.

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Royale got nailed neatly between door and jamb. Had it been his head that was caught, it would have been curtains. As it was, it caught his shoulders; but even so it was enough to make him grunt in agony and send the gun spinning out of his hand to fall a couple of yards down the passage. I dived for it. I scooped it up by the barrel, swung round, still crouched, as I heard the quick step behind me. The butt of the automatic caught the diving Royale somewhere on the face. It took only a couple of seconds to push him off and change my grip to the butt of the pistol, but two seconds would be more than enough for a man like Jablonsky.

His foot caught my gun hand and the gun landed twenty feet away. I launched myself for his legs but he moved to one side with the speed of a flyweight, lifted his knee, and sent me crashing against the open door. And then it was too late, for he had the Mauser in his hand and it was pointing between my eyes.

I climbed slowly to my feet, not trying anything. The general and Vyland, the latter with a gun in his hand, came crowding through the open door, then relaxed when they saw Jablonsky with the gun on me. Vyland helped a now moaning Royale to a sitting position: he had a long heavily-bleeding cut above his left eye, and tomorrow he'd have a duck's egg bruise there.

After maybe half a minute Royale shook his head to clear it, wiped blood away with the back of his hand, and looked slowly round till his eyes found mine. I'd been mistaken. I'd thought his the emptiest, the most expressionless eyes I'd ever seen, but I'd been mistaken. I looked in them and I could almost smell the moist freshly-turned earth of an open grave.

"I can see that you gents really do need me around," Jablonsky said jovially. "I never thought anyone would try that stuff with Royale and live to talk about it. But we learn." He dug into a side pocket and brought out a set of very slender blue-steel handcuffs and slipped them expertly on my wrists. "A souvenir of the bad old days," he explained apologetically. "Would there happen to be another pair and some wire or chain round the house?"

"It might be arranged," Vyland said mechanically. He still couldn't credit what had happened to his infallible hatchet-man.

"Fine." Jablonsky grinned down at Royale. "You don't need to lock your door tonight, I'll keep Talbot out of your hair." Royale transferred his sombre, evil stare from my face to Jablonsky's and his expression didn't alter at all. I fancied perhaps Royale was beginning to have ideas about a double grave.

The butler led us upstairs and along a narrow passage to the back of the big house, took a key from his pocket, unlocked a door and ushered us in. It was just another bedroom, sparsely but expensively furnished, with a washbasin in one corner and a modern mahogany bed in the middle of the right wall. To the left was a communicating door to another bedroom. The butler took a second key from his pocket and unlocked this door also. It gave on to another room, the mirror image of the first, except for the bed, which was an oldfashioned iron-railed effort. It looked

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as if it had been made with girders left over from the Key West bridge. It looked solid. It looked as if it was going to be my bed.

We went back into the other room. Jablonsky stretched out his hand. "The keys, please."

The butler hesitated, peered uncertainly at him, then shrugged, handed over the keys, and turned to leave.

Jablonsky said pleasantly, "This Mauser I'm holding here, friend—d'you want me to . . ."

"I don't understand, sir."

"'Sir,' hey? That's good. I wouldn't have expected them to have books on buttling in Alcatraz. The other key, my friend. The one leading to the passage from Talbot's room."

The butler scowled, handed over a third key, and left. Whatever buttling book he'd read, he'd skipped the section on closing doors, but it was a stout door and it stood up to it. Jablonsky grinned, locked the door with an ostentatious click, pulled the curtains, checked rapidly that there were no peepholes in the walls, and crossed back to where I stood.

Five or six times he smacked a massive fist into a massive palm, kicked the wall, and knocked over an armchair with a thud that shook the room. Then he said, not too softly, not too loudly, "Get up when you're ready, friend. That's just a little warning, shall we say, not to try any further tricks. Just move one finger and you'll think the Chrysler building fell on top of you."

I didn't move a finger. Neither did Jablonsky. There was a complete silence inside the room. We listened hard. The silence in the passage outside was not complete. With his flat feet and adenoidal, broken-nosed breathing, the butler was a good twenty feet away by the time we heard the last of his creaking footfalls.

Jablonsky took out a key, softly opened the handcuffs, pocketed them, and shook my hand as if he meant to break every finger I had. It felt like it, too; but for all that, my grin was as big, as delighted as his own. We lit cigarettes and started on the two rooms with toothpicks, looking for listening devices.

The place was loaded with them.

EXACTLY twenty-four hours later I climbed into the sports car that had been left empty, but with ignition key in the lock, four hundred yards away from the entrance lodge to the general's house. It was the same car that I'd stolen the previous afternoon.

For me it had been a very long day indeed. Lying fully dressed and handcuffed to the rails of an iron bed for twelve hours while the temperature in a closed-window south-facing room rises to a hundred in the shade—well, the heat and the somnolent activity would have been just right for a Galapagos tortoise. It left me as limp as a shot rabbit.

They'd kept me there all day, Jablonsky bringing me food and parading me shortly after dinner before the general, Vyland, and Royale to let them see how good a watchdog he was and that I was still relatively intact. Relatively was the word: to increase the

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effect I'd redoubled my limp and had sticking plaster over cheek and chin.

Royale needed no such adventitious aids to advertise the fact that he had been in the wars. I'd done a good job on Royale; and I knew, for all the empty remote expression that was back on his face and one good eye, that he'd never rest until he'd done a better job on me. A permanent job.

The night air was cool and sweet and full of the smell of the salt sea. I had the hood down and as I travelled south I leaned far back and to one side to let the freshness drive away the last of the cobwebs from my dopey mind. It wasn't just the heat that had made my mind sluggish; I had slept so long during that sticky afternoon that I had overslept and was paying for it; but then, I wasn't going to get much sleep that coming night.

Once or twice I thought of Jablonsky, that big man with the tanned face and the engaging grin, sitting back in his upstairs room diligently and solemnly guarding my empty bedroom with all three keys in his pocket. I felt in my own pocket and they were still there, the duplicates that Jablonsky had had cut that morning when he had taken the air in the direction of Marble Springs.

I forgot about Jablonsky. He could take better care of himself than any man I'd ever known. I had enough troubles of my own coming up that night.

The last traces of the brilliant red sunset had just vanished over the wine-dark gulf to the west when I saw a green-shaded lantern on the right of the road. I passed it, then a second; then at the third I turned sharp right and ran the car down on to a little stone jetty, switching off my headlights even before I coasted to a standstill beside a tall, bulky man with a tiny pencil torch in his hand.

He took my arm—he had to, I was blind from staring into the glaring white pool of light cast by the car's headlights—and led me wordlessly down a flight of wooden steps to a floating landing jetty and across this to a long dark shape that lay rocking gently by the side of the jetty. I was seeing better already, and I managed to grab a stay and jump down into the boat without a helping hand.

A squat, short man rose to greet me. "Mr. Talbot?"

"Yes. Captain Zaimis, isn't it?"

The *Matapan* was at least forty feet long, twin-masted, with curious athwartships and fore-and-aft rails just above the height of a tall man's head. Both men and vessel were Greek: the crew were Greeks to a man and if the *Matapan* wasn't entirely Grecian, she had at least been built by Greek shipwrights who settled in Florida for the express purpose of building these sponge ships.

"A fine night for the job in hand," I said.

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. I don't think so. It is not the night that John Zaimis would have chosen."

I didn't point out that choice didn't enter into the matter. I said, "Too clear, is that it?"

"Not that." He turned away for a moment, gave some orders in what could only have been Greek, and men started moving about

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the deck, unhitching ropes from the bollards on the landing stage. He turned back to me. " Excuse me if I speak to them in our old tongue. Those three boys are not yet six months in this country. My own boys, they will not dive. A hard life, they say, too hard a life. So we have to bring the young men from Greece . . . I don't like the weather, Mr. Talbot. It is too fine a night."

" That's what I said."

" No." He shook his head vigorously. " Too fine. The air is too still, and the little breeze it comes from the north-west. That is bad. Tonight the sun was a flame in the sky. That is bad. You feel the little waves that are rocking the *Matapan*? When the weather is good, the little waves they slap against the hull every three seconds, maybe every four. Tonight?" He shrugged. " Twelve seconds, maybe every fifteen. For forty years I have sailed out of Tarpon Springs. I know the waters here, Mr. Talbot. A big storm comes."

" A big storm, eh? " When it came to big storms I didn't fancy myself very much. " Hurricane warning out? "

" No."

" When will it come? " I asked.

" Eight hours, forty-eight hours, I do not know." He pointed due west, the source of the long slow oily swell. " But it comes from there . . . You will find your rubber suit below, Mr. Talbot."

Two hours and thirteen miles later we were uncomfortably nearer that still distant storm. We had travelled at full speed, but full speed on the *Matapan* was nothing to write home about. Almost a month ago two civilian engineers, sworn to secrecy, had bypassed the exhaust of the *Matapan*'s engine to an underwater cylinder with a curiously arranged system of baffle plates. They'd done a fine job, the exhaust of the *Matapan* was no more than a throaty whisper, but back pressure had cut the thrust output in half.

But it was fast enough. The farther out we went into the starlit gulf, the more convinced I was of the hopelessness of what I had set out to do.

There was no moon that night. Cirrus clouds in long grey sheets began to fill the sky. Then the rain came, not heavy but solid and penetrating.

I must have dozed off, for the next I knew the rain had stopped and someone was shaking my shoulder. It was the skipper, and he was saying softly, " There she is, Mr. Talbot. The X 13."

I stood up, using a mast to support myself—the swell was becoming really unpleasant now—and followed the direction of his pointing hand. Not that he needed to point; even at the distance of a mile the X 13 seemed to fill the entire sky.

I looked at it, looked away, then looked back again. It was still there. I'd lost more than most, I didn't have a great deal to live for, but I did have a little, so I stood there and wished myself ten thousand miles away.

I was scared. If this was the end of the road, I wished to God I'd never set foot on it . . .

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I'd heard of those offshore rigs. I'd even had one of them described to me by a man who designed them, but I'd never seen one, and now that I did I realised that the description I'd had had been on the same level as my imaginative capacity to clothe with flesh the bare bones of facts and statistics.

I looked at the X 13 and I just didn't believe it.

It was enormous. It was angular and ungainly as was no other structure I'd ever seen before. And, above all, it was unreal, a weird combination of Jules Verne and some of the fancier flights of space fiction.

At first glance, in the fleeting patches of dim starlight, it looked like a forest of huge factory chimneys sticking up out of the sea. Halfway up their heights those chimneys were all joined by a deep and massive platform through the sides of which the chimneys penetrated. And, at the far right-hand side, built on the platform itself and reaching up into the sky, mysterious and fragile in the spiderlike tracery of its slenderly interwoven girders, twice the height of the chimneys and outlined against the night sky in its fairylike festoon of white and coloured operating and aircraft warning lights, was the oil-drilling derrick itself.

The chimneys, I knew, were massive tubular metal legs of almost unbelievable strength, each one capable of supporting a weight of several hundred tons, and on this rig I could count no less than fourteen of those legs, seven on each side, and there must have been a stretch of four hundred feet between the outer ones at the ends. And the astonishing thing was that this huge platform was mobile: it had been towed there with the platform deep-sunk in the sea and the legs thrusting high up almost to the level of the top of the derrick.

Arrived at the right spot, those legs had dropped right down to the floor of the sea—and then the whole huge platform and derrick, maybe four or five thousand tons in all and powered by huge engines, had risen dripping from the sea till it was safe beyond the reach of even the highest of the hurricane-lashed waves of the Gulf of Mexico.

All this I had known; but knowing and seeing weren't the same things at all.

A hand touched my arm and I jumped. I had quite forgotten where I was. "What do you think of him, Mr. Talbot?" It was the skipper. "You like, eh?"

"Yes. It's nice. How much did this little toy cost? Any idea?"

"Four million." Zaimis shrugged. "Maybe four and a half."

"A fair investment," I conceded. "Four million dollars."

"Eight," Zaimis corrected. "A man cannot just come and start drilling, Mr. Talbot. First he buy the land under the sea. Five thousand acres, three million dollars. Then to drill a well—just one well, maybe two miles deep—it cost perhaps three-quarters of a million. If he's lucky."

Eight million dollars. And not an investment either. A gamble. Geologists could be wrong, they were more often wrong than right.

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General Blair Ruthven, a man with eight million dollars to throw away: what colossal price could a man like that, with a reputation like his, be working for if he was prepared, as he so obviously was prepared, to step outside the law? There was only one way of finding out.

I shivered and turned to John Zaimis. "You can get in close? Real close, I mean?"

"All the way." He pointed to the near side of the vast structure. "You have seen the ship tied up alongside?"

I hadn't, but I could see her now: a lean dark shape maybe two hundred and fifty feet long, completely dwarfed by the massive rig, the tips of her masts reaching no more than halfway up to the platform deck of the oil-rig. I looked back at Zaimis.

"Is that going to queer our pitch, John?"

"Get in our way, you mean? No. We make a wide curve and approach from the south."

He touched the rudder and the *Matapan* swung away to port, heading to bypass the X 13 to the south. To have gone to the north, the right, would have brought the *Matapan* under the glare of the arc- and floodlights that illuminated the big working platform round the derrick. Even at a mile we could clearly see men moving around the derrick, and the subdued hum of powerful machinery, like that of Diesel compressors, came at us clearly over the darkened waters. So much, at least, was in our favour; it had not occurred to me that work on those mobile rigs would go on twenty-four hours a day, but at least the clamour of their operations would drown the throaty whisper of the *Matapan*'s engines.

The boat had begun to corkscrew violently. We were quartering to the south-west, taking that long deepening swell on our starboard bow, and water was beginning to break over the sides of the boat. And I was getting wet. I crouched under a tarpaulin near the rudder, lit a last cigarette under cover, and looked at the skipper.

"That ship out there, John. What chances of it moving away?"

"I don't know. Not much, I think. It is a supply and power ship. It brings out food and drink and mud for the drills, and thousands of gallons of oil. Look closely, Mr. Talbot. It is a kind of small tanker. Now it brings oil for the big machines, and perhaps electricity from its dynamos. Later, when the strike comes, it takes oil away."

I peered out under a corner of the tarpaulin. It did look, as John said, a kind of small tanker. But what interested me right then was his statement that it was there most of the time.

"I want to go aboard that ship. Can do?" I didn't want to go aboard, but I knew I had to. The idea of a vessel more or less permanently moored there had never occurred to me. Now that I knew it to be a fact, it was suddenly the most important factor in my considerations.

"But—but I was told you wanted to go aboard the rig itself, Mr. Talbot."

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"Yes. Perhaps. But later. Can you manage the ship?"

"I can try." Captain Zaimis sounded grim. "It is a bad night, Mr. Talbot."

Still angling south-west we were passing directly opposite the middle of one of the long sides of the rig, and I could see that the massive steel columns supporting the derrick platform were not so symmetrically arranged as I had imagined. Between the fourth and fifth of the huge legs, on either side, was a gap of perhaps a hundred and fifty feet, and here the platform was scooped out to a much lower level than the main deck.

On this lower level the thin spindly cigar-shaped outline of a crane reached up as high as the topmost level of the columns. The ship was moored directly below this cut-out well-deck, spanning the gap and a couple of steel pillars on either side of the gap.

Five minutes later the skipper changed course until we were heading due west again, in a direction that would have taken us clear to the south of the rig, but we had hardly time to get accustomed to the comparative comfort of heading straight into the swell when he put the helm over again and headed north-west. We steered straight in, as it seemed, for the most southerly leg on the landward side of the rig, passing within forty feet of the bow of the ship moored alongside, scraped by the leg with only feet to spare and so found ourselves directly under the massive platform of the oil-rig.

One of the young Greeks, a blackhaired bronzed boy by the name of Andrew, was busy in the bows, and as we passed right under the platform and came abreast of the second pillar from the south on the seaward side he called softly to Captain Zaimis, and threw a lifebelt, attached to a coil of light rope, as far as he could to one side. As he did so, John cut the engine to the merest whisper, and the *Matapan*, urged by the swell, drifted slowly back past one side of the pillar while the lifebelt came back on the other, so passing the light line completely round the pillar.

Andrew picked up the lifebelt with a boathook and started pulling in the grass line which had been bent on to a heavier manila; within a minute the *Matapan* was securely moored to the pillar, with the engine just ticking over sufficiently to give her enough way to take the strain of the rope so that she wouldn't snag too heavily in the steadily deepening swell. Nobody had heard us, nobody had seen us—not, at least, as far as we could tell.

"You will be very quick," John said softly, anxiously. "I do not know how long we shall be able to wait. I smell the storm."

He was anxious. I was anxious. We were all anxious. But all he had to do was to sit in that boat. Nobody was going to beat his head in or weight him down with stones and throw him into the Gulf of Mexico.

"Half an hour." I stripped off my overcoat, snapped the vulcanised neck and wrist-cuffs of the tanned twill and rubber suit I was wearing beneath it, slipped an oxygen apparatus over my shoulders, tightened the straps, took the nose- and eye-piece in

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one hand and coat, pants, and hat under the other arm, and stepped gingerly over into the rubber raft the crew had already slipped over the side.

Andrew sat at the after end of this flimsy contraption, holding a line in his hand, and, as soon as I'd settled, let go his grip on the gunwale of the *Matapan*. The drift of the swell carried us quickly under the gloomy mass of the platform, Andrew paying out the line as we went. Paddling a rubber dinghy in a swell is difficult enough, paddling it in a specific direction against such a swell all but impossible; it would be a hundred times easier to regain the *Matapan* by hauling ourselves back hand over hand.

At a whispered word from me, Andrew checked the rope and took a turn. We were near up now to the side of the ship, but still in deep shadow. The ship lay close in to the massive legs, but the platform overhung those legs, and so ourselves, by a good dozen feet, so that the angled light from the floodlights by the crane on the well-deck above barely succeeded in touching the far side—the port side—of the upper deck of the ship. All the rest of the vessel lay shrouded in deep darkness except for a patch of light that fell on the foc'sle from a rectangular gap higher up in the overhang of the platform. Through this hole was suspended the vertical gangway, a zigzag set of caged-in metal steps like a fire-escape, which, I supposed, could be raised or lowered with the ebb and flow of the tide.

The conditions might have been made for me.

The ship was low in the water, the ribbed oil tanks standing high but the gunwale only at waist level. I took a pencil torch from my coat and went aboard.

I moved right forrad in the darkness. Apart from a glimmer from the accommodation aft there was no light at all on board, not even navigation or riding lights: the Christmas tree illuminations of the oil derrick made those superfluous.

There were deep sliding vertical doors giving on to the raised foc'sle. I pulled the head and foot bolts on one of these, waited for a slight roll of the ship to help, and eased the door back a crack, enough for my head, arm, and light. Barrels, paint drums, ropes, wood, heavy chains—it was some sort of bosun's store. There was nothing there for me. I eased the door back, slid in the bolts, and left.

I made my way aft over the tanks. There were raised trapdoors with large clips which stuck out at all angles, there were fore-and-aft and athwartships pipes of every conceivable size and at every conceivable height, there were valves, big wheels for turning those valves and nasty knobbly ventilators. It was like hacking your way through a virgin jungle. A metal virgin jungle. But I made it, and I made it with the sure knowledge that there wasn't a trap or hatch on that deck able to take anything larger than a human being.

There was nothing for me in the stern either. Most of the deck space and superstructure there was given over to cabins: the one

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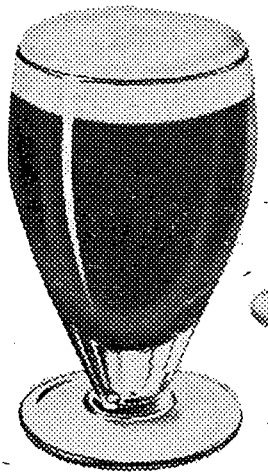

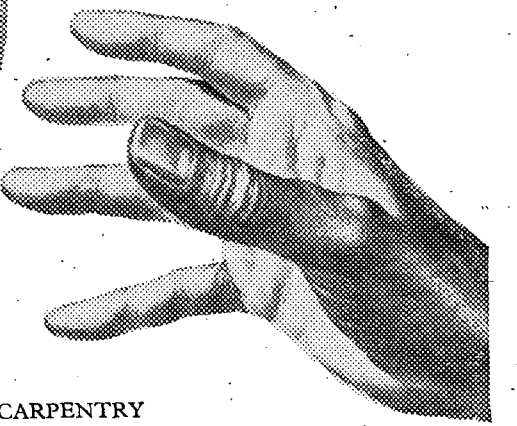

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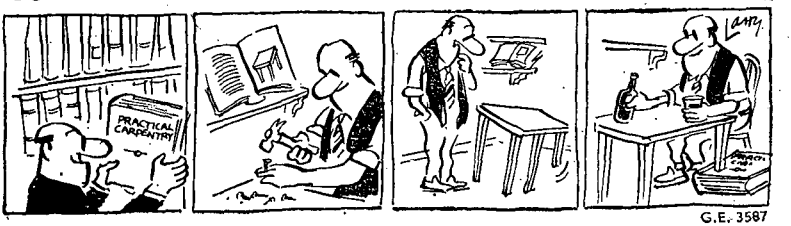

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big coach-type hatch was glassed in and had a couple of skylights open. I used the torch. Engines. That ruled that hatch out. And the whole of the upper deck.

Andrew was waiting patiently in the dinghy. He watched me clamping on my rubber skull-cap and oxygen mask, and helped me make fast a lifeline round the waist, and it took the two of us a whole minute: the rubber raft was pitching and bouncing so much that we had one hand for ourselves and only one for the job.

With the closed oxygen circuit the safe maximum depth I could go to was about twenty-five feet. The oiler drew perhaps fifteen, so I had plenty in hand. The underwater search for a wire, or for something suspended from a wire, proved far easier than I had anticipated, for even at fifteen feet the effect of the surface swell motion was almost negligible.

Andrew paid out, slackened, and tightened the lifeline to adjust to my every underwater movement as if he had been doing this sort of thing all his working life, which indeed he had.

I covered the entire submerged length of the oiler twice, keeping close to the bilge keels on either side, examining every foot of the way with a powerful underwater torch. Halfway along the second sweep I saw a huge moray eel, which writhed out of the darkness beyond the beam of the torch and thrust its head with its evil unwinking eyes and vicious poisonous teeth right up against the glass of the torch. I clicked the beam on and off a couple of times and he was gone. But that was all I saw.

I felt tired when I got back to the rubber dinghy and hauled myself aboard. I felt tired because fifteen minutes' hard swimming in an oxygen outfit would make anybody tired; but I knew too well that if I'd found what I'd been looking for tiredness would never have touched me. I'd banked heavily on finding what I'd been looking for in or under that ship. I felt let down.

I felt tired and low and dispirited and cold. I thought of steaming coffee, and a long long nightcap. I thought of Herman Jablonsky sleeping peacefully in his mahogany bed back in the general's house. I stripped off mask and cylinder, kicked the flippers off my feet, pulled on a pair of shoes with numbed and fumbling fingers, flung my trousers, coat, and hat up on the deck of the oiler and dragged myself up after them.

Three minutes later, dressed in my outer clothes and dripping like a blanket that's just been hauled from a washer, I was on my way up the enclosed gangway to the well-deck of the oil-rig a hundred feet above my head.

I had no gun . . . And if a gun were pulled on me? Did I start running down a hundred and thirty steps while someone picked me off at their leisure? I concluded that any halfway intelligent man would have gone straight back down.

I went right on up . . .

There was no one there. The gangway emerged in an alcove closed off on three sides—by the railed platform edge on one side,

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by high steel walls on the other two. The fourth side gave directly on to the well-deck where the crane was. What little I could see of this well was brightly illuminated, and I could hear the clank of machinery and the voices of men not thirty feet away. It didn't seem a good idea to wander straight out into their midst, so I looked for another way out. I found it at once, a set of steel rungs built into one of the twelve-foot high steel bulkheads by my side.

I went up those, flattening myself out as I went over the top, crawled a few yards, then stood up behind the shelter of one of the huge pillars. I could see the whole panorama of the oil-rig now.

A hundred yards away on the larger raised platform to the north was the derrick itself, looking more massive than ever, with control cabins at its base and men moving around: under the surface of that platform, I supposed, would be the power-generating machinery, the living accommodation.

The smaller platform to the south, the one on which I stood, was almost completely bare with a semi-circular extension reaching out over the sea to the south. The purpose of this large cleared space baffled me for a moment, and then something clicked in my memory: Mary Ruthven had said that the general normally crossed from oil-rig to shore by helicopter. The helicopter would need a landing-ground. This was it.

On the well-deck between the two platforms, almost at my feet, men were moving large barrels with the aid of a tracked crane, trundling them into a brightly-lit opening halfway along the high bulkhead on the northern platform. Oil would be piped aboard, so those barrels could only be "mud," a chemical mixture of barites used for forcing down under pressure the cement that formed the outer casing of the drill hole. There was a whole series of those big storage sheds, most of them open, extending right across the width of the rig. There, if anywhere, would be what I was looking for.

I crossed to the far side of the south platform, found another set of rungs and dropped down to the well-deck. There was nothing to be gained by caution or stealth now; apart from the fact that they would only excite suspicion, the time factor was becoming all important. With the weather steadily worsening—the wind now seemed twice as strong as it had been half an hour previously, and it wasn't just a factor of the height—Captain Zaimis would be climbing up the mast. Perhaps he might even be forced to take off without me. But there was no future in that thought and certainly none for me. I put it out of my mind and crossed to the first of the storage bays.

The door was held on a heavy steel latch, unlocked. I opened the latch, pushed back the door, and passed inside. It was pitch dark, but my torch found the light switch right away. I pressed it and looked around.

The bay was perhaps a hundred feet long. Stacked in nearly empty racks on both sides were three or four dozen screwed pipes almost as long as the bay itself. Round each pipe, near the end,

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were deep gouge marks as if some heavy metal claws had bitten into it. Sections of the drill pipe. And nothing else.

I switched off the light, went out, pulled shut the door, and felt a heavy hand on my shoulder.

"Would you be looking for something, my friend?" It was a deep rough no-nonsense voice, as Irish as a sprig of shamrock.

I turned slowly, but not too slowly, pulling the lapels of my coat together with both hands as if to ward off the wind and the thin cold rain that was beginning to sift across the deck, glittering palely through the beams of the arc-lamps then vanishing into the darkness again.

He was a short stocky man, middle-aged, with a battered face that could be kindly or truculent as the needs of the moment demanded. At that moment, the balance of expression was tipped on the side of truculence. But not much.

I decided to risk it.

"As a matter of fact, I am." Far from trying to conceal my British accent, I exaggerated it. A marked high-class English accent in the States excites no suspicion other than the charitable one that you may be slightly wrong in the head. "The field foreman told me to inquire for the—ah—roustabout foreman. Are you he?"

"Golly!" he said. I felt that it should have been "Begorrah!" but the grammatical masterpiece had floored him. You could see his mind clambering on to its feet again. "Mr. Jerrold sent you to look for me, eh?"

"Yes, indeed. Miserable night, isn't it?" I pulled my hat-brim lower. "I certainly don't envy you fellows—"

"If you was looking for me," he interrupted, "why were you poking about in there?"

"Ah yes. Well, I could see you were busy, and as he thought he had lost it in there, I thought perhaps I—"

"Who had lost what where?" He breathed deeply, patience on a monument.

"The general. General Ruthven. His briefcase, with very important private papers—and very urgent. He'd been making a tour of inspection yesterday—let me see now, it would have been early afternoon—when he received the dastardly news that his daughter had been kidnapped. He went straight for his helicopter, forgetting all about the briefcase—I'm Farnborough, his private confidential secretary." It was very long odds indeed against one of the scores of roustabout foremen employed by the general knowing the name of his secretary.

"Want me and my boys help you look? If it's there we'll have it in five minutes."

He walked away, issued orders to his gang of men. But I had no interest in the result of the search, my sole remaining interest lay in getting off that platform with all speed. There would be no briefcase there and there would be nothing else there. The foreman's gang were sliding doors open with the abandon of men who

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have nothing to conceal. I didn't even bother to glance inside any of the bays, the fact that doors could be opened without unlocking and were being opened indiscriminately in the presence of a total stranger was proof enough for me that there was nothing to be concealed.

And apart from the fact that there were far too many men there to swear to secrecy, it stood out a mile that that genial Irishman was not the type to get mixed up in any criminal activities. Some people are like that, you know it the moment you see and speak to them. The roustabout foreman was one of those.

I could have slipped away and down the gangway while the search was still going on but that would have been stupid. The search for the missing briefcase would be nothing compared to the all-out search that would then start for Farnborough. They might assume I had fallen over the side.

Powerful searchlights could pick up the *Matapan* in a matter of minutes. And even were I aboard the *Matapan*, I didn't want to leave the vicinity of the rig. Not yet. And above all I didn't want the news to get back ashore that an intruder disguised as, or at least claiming to be, the general's secretary had been prowling round the X 13.

What to do when the search was over? The foreman would expect me to go back to the derrick side, where the accommodation and offices were, presumably to report failure of a mission to Mr. Jerrold. Once I left for there, my retreat to the gangway would be cut off. And so far it hadn't occurred to the foreman to ask how I had arrived aboard the rig.

The search, as far as I could see, was over. Doors were being banged shut and the foreman was starting back towards me when a bulkhead phone rang. He moved towards it. I moved into the darkest patch of shadow I could see and buttoned my coat right up to the neck. That, at least, wouldn't excite suspicion: the wind was strong now, the cold rain driving across the well-deck at an angle of almost forty-five degrees.

The foreman hung up and crossed over to where I was standing. "Sorry, Mr. Farnborough, no luck. You sure he left it here?"

"Certain, Mr. —ah—"

"Curran. Joe Curran. Well, it's not there now. And we can't look any more." He hunched deeper into his black glistening oilskin. "Gotta go and start yo-yo-ing that damned pipe."

"Oh yes," I said politely.

He grinned and explained. "The drill. Gotta haul it up and change it."

"On a night like this and in a wind like this? And it must take some time."

"It takes some time. Six hours if we're lucky. That damned drill's buried two and a half miles straight down, Mr. Farnborough."

I made the proper noises of astonishment instead of the noises of relief I felt like making. Mr. Curran working on the derrick for the next six hours in this weather would have more to worry about than

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stray secretaries. He made to go. Already his men had filed past and climbed up a companionway to the north platform. "Coming, Mr. Farnborough?"

"Not yet." I smiled wanly. "I think I'll go and sit in the shelter of the gangway for a few minutes and work out what I'm going to tell the general." I had an inspiration. "You see, he only phoned up about five minutes ago. You know what he's like. Lord knows what I'm going to tell him."

"Yeah. It's tough." The words meant nothing, already his mind was on the recovery of the drill. "Be seein' you."

"Yes. Thank you." I watched him out of sight and two minutes later I was back aboard the rubber dinghy: another two minutes and we had been hauled back to the *Matapan*.

"You have been far too long, Mr. Talbot," Captain Zaimis scolded. His small agitated figure gave the impression of hopping around in the darkness although it would have taken a monkey to hop around that pitching heaving sponge-boat without falling overboard with the first hop. The engine note was much louder now: not only had the skipper been forced to increase engine revolutions to keep a certain amount of slack on the rope tying the *Matapan* to the pillar, but the vessel was now pitching so wildly that almost every time the bows plunged deep into the sea the underwater exhaust beneath the stern came clear in a brief but carrying crackle of sound.

"You have been successful, no?" Captain Zaimis called in my ear.

"No."

"So. It is sad. But no matter. We must leave at once."

"Ten minutes, John. Just another ten minutes. It's terribly important."

"No. We must leave at once." He started to call the order to cast off to the young Greek sitting in the bows when I caught his arm.

"Are you afraid, Captain Zaimis?" Despicable, but I was desperate.

"I am beginning to be afraid," he said with dignity. "All wise men know when it is time to be afraid and I hope I am not a fool, Mr. Talbot. There are times when a man is selfish if he is not afraid. I have six children, Mr. Talbot."

"And I have three." I hadn't even one, not any more. I wasn't even married, not any more.

For a long moment we stood there, clinging on to the mast while the *Matapan* pitched and corkscrewed wickedly in that almost impenetrable darkness under the cavernous shadow of the oil-rig; but apart from the thin whistling of the rain-laden wind in the rigging, it was a long silent moment. I changed my tactics.

"The lives of men depend upon this, Captain Zaimis. Do not ask me how I know, but I know. Would you have it said that men died because Captain Zaimis would not wait ten minutes?"

There was a long pause, the rain hissed whitely into the heaving

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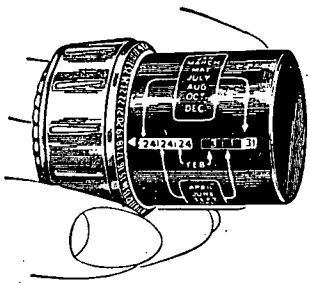

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blackness of the sea beneath us, then he said, "Ten minutes. No more."

I slipped off shoes and outer clothing, made sure the lifeline was securely tied to my waist just above the weights, slipped on the oxygen mask and stumbled forward to the bows, again thinking, for no reason at all, of big Herman Jablonsky sleeping the sleep of the just in his mahogany bed.

I watched until a particularly big swell came along, waited until it had passed under and the bows were deep in the water, stepped off into the sea and grabbed for the rope that moored the *Matapan* to the pillar.

I went out towards the pillar hand over hand—it couldn't have been more than twenty feet away—but even with the rope to help me I got a pretty severe hammering, and without the oxygen mask I don't know how much water I would have swallowed. I collided with the pillar before I realised I was near it, let go the rope, and tried to grab the pillar. Why, I don't know. I might as well have tried to put my arms round a railway petrol tanker, for the diameter was about the same.

I grabbed the rope again before I was swept away, and worked my way round to the left towards the seaward side of the massive steel leg. It wasn't easy. Every time the *Matapan*'s bows rose with the swell the rope tightened and jammed my clutching hand immovably against the metal, but just so long as I didn't lose any fingers I was beyond caring.

When my back was squarely to the swell I released the rope, spread out my arms and legs, thrust myself below water, and started to descend that pillar something in the fashion of a Sinhalese boy descending an enormous palm tree, Andrew paying out the line as skilfully as before. Ten feet, twenty, nothing; thirty, nothing; thirty-five, nothing. My heart was starting to pound irregularly and my head beginning to swim; I was well below the safe operating limit of that closed oxygen mask. Quickly I half swam, half clawed my way up and came to rest about fifteen feet below the surface, clinging to that enormous pillar like a cat halfway up a tree and unable to get down.

Five of Captain Zaimis' ten minutes were gone. My time was almost run out. And yet it *had* to be that oil-rig, it simply had to be. The general himself had said so, and there had been no need to tell anything but the truth to a man with no chance of escape; and if that weren't enough, the memory of that stiff, creaking, leaden-footed man who'd brought the tray of drinks into the general's room carried with it complete conviction.

But there was nothing on the ship alongside, nor was there anything under it. I would have sworn to that. There was nothing on the oil-rig itself; I would have sworn to that too. And if it wasn't on the platform, then it was under the platform, and if it was under the platform it was attached to a wire or chain. And that wire or chain must be attached, underwater, to one of those supporting legs.

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I tried to think as quickly and clearly as I could. Which of those fourteen legs would they use? Almost certainly I could eliminate right away the eight legs that supported the derrick platform. Too much activity there, too many lights, too many eyes, too many dangling lines to catch the hundreds of fish attracted by the powerful overhead lights, too much danger altogether. So it had to be the helicopter platform under which the *Matapan* was rolling and plunging at the end of her mooring rope.

To narrow it still further—I had to narrow it, to localise the search by gambling on the probable and ignoring the possible and almost equally probable, there were only minutes left—it was more likely that what I sought was on the seaward side, where I was now, than on the landward side where there was always danger from ships mooring there.

The middle pillar of the seaward three, the one to which the *Matapan* was moored, I had already investigated. Which of the remaining two to try was settled at once by the fact that my life-line was passed round the left-hand side of the pillar. To have worked my way round three-quarters of the circumference would have taken too long. I rose to the surface, gave two tugs to indicate that I would want more slack, placed both feet against the metal, pushed off hard, and struck out for the corner pillar.

I almost didn't make it. I saw now why Captain Zaimis was so worried—and he'd a forty-foot boat and forty horsepower to cope with the power of the wind and the sea and that steadily growing, deepening swell that was already breaking white on the tops. All I had was myself and I could have done with more. The heavy weights round my waist didn't help me any, it took me a hundred yards of frantic thrashing and gasping to cover the fifteen yards that lay between the two pillars, and closed oxygen sets aren't designed for the kind of gasping I was doing. But I made it. Just.

Once more on the seaward side and pinned against the pillar by the pressure of the swell, I started crabbing my way down below the surface. This time it was easy, for right away, by chance, my hand found a broad, deeply- and sharply-cut series of slightly curved grooves in the metal extending vertically downwards. I am no engineer, but I knew this must be the worm that engaged against the big motor-driven pinion which would be required to raise and lower those pillars. There must have been one on the last pillar also, but I'd missed it.

It was like going down a cliff with a series of rungs cut in the rock face. I paused every other foot or so, reaching out on both sides, but there was nothing, no projection, no wire, just the smooth rather slimy surface. Steadily, painstakingly, I forced myself downwards, increasingly more conscious of the gripping pressure of the water, the difficulty of breathing. Somewhere close on forty feet I called it a day. Damaging my eardrums or lungs or getting nitrogen into the bloodstream wasn't going to help anyone. I gave up. I went up.

Just below the surface I stopped to have a rest and clear my head.

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I felt bitterly disappointed, I had banked more heavily than I knew on this last chance. Wearily, I laid my head against the pillar and thought with a bleak hopelessness that I would have to start all over again. And I had no idea in the world where to start. I felt tired, dead tired. And then, in a moment, the tiredness left me as if it had never been.

That great steel pillar was alive with sound. There could be no doubt about it, instead of being silent and dead and full of water, it was alive with sound.

I ripped off my rubber helmet, coughed and gagged and spluttered as some water found its way in under the oxygen mask, then pressed my ear hard against the cold steel.

The pillar reverberated with a deep resonant vibration that jarred the side of my head. Water-filled pillars don't reverberate with sound, not with sound of any kind. But this one did, beyond all question. It wasn't water that was in that pillar, it was air. Air! All at once I identified that peculiar sound I was hearing; I should have identified it immediately. That rhythmical rising and falling of sound as a motor accelerated and slowed, accelerated and slowed, was a sound that had for many years been part and parcel of my professional life. It was an air compressor, and a big one at that, hard at work inside that pillar. An air compressor deep down below water level inside one of the support legs of a mobile rig standing far out in the Gulf of Mexico. It didn't make sense, it didn't make any kind of sense at all.

I leaned my forehead against the metal, and it seemed as if the shuddering jarring vibration was an insistent clamorous voice trying to tell me something, something of urgency and vital importance, if only I would listen.

I listened. For half a minute, perhaps a minute, I listened, and all of a sudden it made the very best kind of sense there was. It was the answer I would never have dreamt of, it was the answer to many things. It took me time to guess this might be the answer, it took me time to realise this must be the answer, but when I did realise it I was left with no doubts in the world. . .

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★ ***The third part of Fear is the Key by Alistair MacLean appears in next month's Argosy on sale October 10***

SOLUTION to ARGOSY CROSSWORD on page 144.

Across. 1, *Cauliflower ears.* 6, *Fire brigade.* 8, *Stalker.* 12, *Eclat.* 13, *Ellen.* 14, *Opposed.* 15, *Inn.* 16, *Sol.* 17, *Prairie.* 18, *Taste.* 19, *Manna.* 20, *Rattles.* 23, *Ringmasters.* 25, *Red Cross Knights.*

Down. 1, *Castles in the air.* 2, *Fleet.* 3, *Oar.* 4, *Eagle.* 5, *Stolen pleasures.* 6, *Falling star.* 7, *Endlessness.* 8, *Stopper.* 9, *Asphalt.* 10, *Kestrel.* 11, *Redeems.* 21, *Anglo.* 22, *Eaten.* 24, *Ass.*

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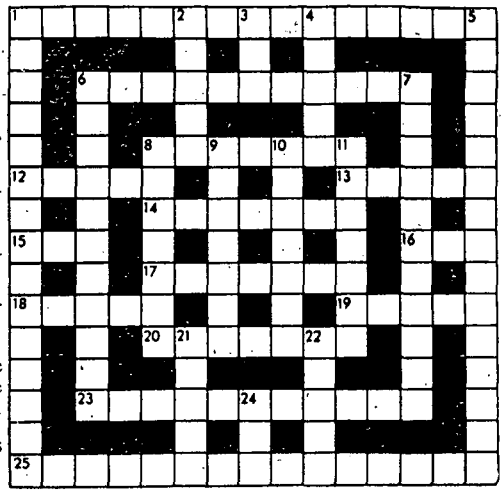
ARGOSY CROSSWORD

Solution on page 143



ACROSS

1 Boxing trophies ? (11, 4).

6 Distinguished extinguishers (4, 7).

8 Hunter is more than a babbler (7).

12 A Celt—crazy for applause (5).

13 " Was to wed the fair —— of brave Lochinvar " (Scott) (5).

14 All our Governments are, officially (7).

15 House full of public spirit (3).

16 Fifth note (3).

17 Wild West setting (7).

18 A test of flavour (5).

19 Pennies from heaven ? No, food ! (5).

20 Startle, upset and clatters (7).

23 These men have the whip hand (11).

25 Hot, angry horsemen ? On the contrary! (3, 5, 7).

DOWN

1 Stopping places for spaceships ? (7, 2, 3, 3).

2 Nimble flotilla (5).

3 Sounds like an alternative blade (3).

4 Well below par, on the links (5).

5 Secret drinking, for instance (6, 9).

6 Hollywood idol on the wane ? (7, 4).

7 Finish without a cape —that's eternity ! (11).

8 Stay by for a bung (7).

9 Like good intentions, it may pave the way (7).

10 The bird in Jake's trellis (7).

11 Visits Uncle, perhaps (7).

21 He's half English, at any rate (5).

22 Consumed in the tea-tent (5).

24 The law is a one, according to Mr. Bumble (3).

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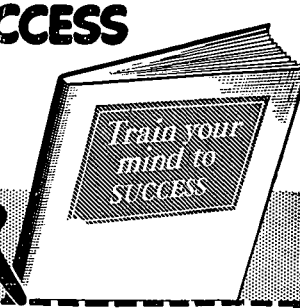

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